A BROKEN ROSARY

BY EDWARD PEPLE



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She struck a few swift chords, and sang of the little Picador
(*See page 58*)

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Illustrated by Scotson Clark

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A BROKEN ROSARY

CHAPTER I

ALONG the marble colonnade of the Gran Duca's palace, clad in the picturesque attire of royal France—the France of Louis XV.—walked a young cavalier, leading by the arm a still younger companion whose face was flushed and angry, whose reluctant and uncertain steps told all too plainly of a surfeit of wine, while his voice rose cross and petulant as that of a pampered child.

"Why do you drag me away when the night is not half over? You are not my master!"

"No, Léon," the other answered soothingly, "not master, but a friend who loves you." Then pointing to the palace, from whence a thousand lights sent out a warm, seductive glow, and the faint, low throb of music followed them to the

iron gateway of the garden, he continued gently: "It is hot and close in there, and already you have drunk a deal more wine than is good for you. Come—the night is beautiful—I want you to walk with me."

"Walk!" his companion growled. "In the devil's name, why leave a winning game to walk?"

"The air is better for your blood than dice and drink."

"Fabien, you're a fool!"

Léon jerked his sleeve from the other's grasp and faced him angrily; his utterance was thick and stumbling; his great grey eyes were blazing.

"And what right of yours," he cried, "if I drain a cask? Am I a babe in arms who needs a whining, white-faced nurse forever dawdling at my heels to tell me when I've had enough, and wipe my lips with the corner of an apron? Leave me in peace! You sicken me with your endless babbling of friendship. *Peste!* Have done with it!"

Fabien answered nothing, and the moonlight falling on his pale, calm face showed only pity

for the drunken boy who heaped unmerited abuse upon him; he sighed and drew his velvet cloak about his shoulders, turned on his heel and strode away, while Léon watched him in sullen silence till a flush of shame crept slowly to his beardless cheek. And this was his friend! A friend from babyhood till now—brave, generous, tender as a mother, when his own unthinking follies brought sorrow and remorse. Fabien! Dearer than a brother, older, cooler, stronger, ever ready to forgive an injury, and now—thrust from him in a burst of childish anger.

For a moment more the boy stood listening; the retreating footsteps died away, and two hot tears rolled slowly down and clung to his quivering chin. He called, but no answer came. He paused, glanced backward at the palace lights and then ran, staggering, to overtake his friend and beg forgiveness.

And Fabien listened in indulgence to his faltering words of penitence, pressed his shoulder tenderly, and, linking an arm through his, led him away from the wine and gaming tables along the cool, white road past terraced gar-

dens, where stately Italian villas reposed in the leafy shadows, under the ruined walls of a once proud castle, now crumbling into dust, till at length they reached the hilltop which overlooked the bay. Here at their feet lay a dusky line of wharves and quays,—a wilderness of restless ships with fretting anchor chains and creaking cordage; there to the right, within the horseshoe's bend, slept Naples with her coverlet cast aside to catch the cooling breezes from the sea, and beyond the bay itself stretched out like a rumpled bed of silver, from which the summer moon had risen in the night. Away to the left old Mount Vesuvius hunched his rugged shoulder across the sky, his snoring head encircled by a wreath of oozing smoke, from whose coils his yellow fangs of flame showed fitfully and sank again to rest. From the hill's crest, like a solitary sentinel, the tiny chapel of Sainte Marie looked down on the sleeping city, and beside it, where the moonlight fell, stood a cracked stone bench half covered with creeping vines.

Thither Fabien led his friend, thinking the breeze might clear his brain of the fumes of drink and cool the blood which ran too riotously

in his veins; but the sloping approach was strewn with stones, and Léon, still unsteady on his feet, tripped and lurched forward, while his rapier, catching between his knees, threw him heavily to the ground. Fabien sprang to aid him, but Léon pushed him angrily aside and stumbled to his feet in a fury at his mishap; then, seeking some object on which to vent his spleen, forgot repentance, and again assailed his friend as the cause of his luckless fall.

"A fine place this," he grumbled, "to bring a gentleman and trip him on the stones—and—and to laugh at his misfortune! *Mon Dieu!* why could you not have left me to my game?"

"But, my boy," his companion pleaded, "I did not laugh at you, and, indeed, I had no thought but sorrow for your hurt. Come, rest for a moment on the bench while I brush your cloak."

"May the fiends devour your bench . . . and you! I want none of either!"

"But only a moment, Léon. . . . Come, I beg you."

"Aye, you're always begging," retorted Léon with an ugly sneer, "begging from dawn

to midnight. What would you have, my ring —my purse?" He flipped a coin from his thumb, and laughed. "Well . . . what more?"

Fabien bit his lip and gazed in silence out across the bay, then, after a pause, said sadly: "Léon . . . I want your love—naught else, believe me."

And Léon, too drunk to understand the fine restraint and unselfishness of his friend's devotion, laughed shrilly at the womanish speech, and offered to buy him a petticoat and a box of rouge; but finding at length that his taunts were met with a bridled tongue, he turned on his heel with a mocking shrug and swung into the road which led to the palace a mile or more away.

Fabien rose from the bench and followed. "Léon," he called, "whither will you go? Surely not back to your silly game? The dice are loaded."

Léon wheeled upon him in a rage. "And what is it to you?" he cried. "Mind your own affairs! Leave me and mine in peace!"

"But, my boy," urged Fabien tenderly, striving to take his arm once more, "'tis folly to play

where you're sure to lose. Come, be advised by an older head."

Léon struck fiercely at Fabien's detaining hand, and answered, with a curse: "A pest on you and your hateful preaching! The loss of my last cracked sou would be a paltry price for the riddance of your company!" Then added, with another tipsy oath, "And besides, you idiot, I was winning—three times running."

"Aye," answered Fabien quietly, "the luck of a fool may win three times for him, but scarcely a fourth, in play with a trickster whose wine is drugged. *Diable!* Léon, you are far too drunk to count the dots upon your dice."

"You lie!"

A hot flush swept across Fabien's cheek and left it deathly white; his thin hand twitched as it crept toward his rapier hilt, paused, and fell limply to his side.

"Go, Léon," he said in sadness, "go if you will. . . . I trouble you no longer."

But Léon, now lashed to unreasoning rage, taunted him with cowardice in swallowing the lie, flung his glove into his friend's pale face, and drew his rapier. The older man, with iron will,

controlled his anger for the sake of the boy he loved, and because of the fiery wine which the crafty duca had administered in the hope of plucking a golden pheasant to the bone. Fabien had seen the trap, and led his friend away, to the ill-disguised annoyance of both the trickster and his dupe, for their host had scowled and chewed a disappointed oath, while Léon left the table grudgingly; and now, as the drug burned fiercely in his veins, his grosser passions bubbled to the surface, and he stood before his gentlest friend with an eager, threatening sword. Poor boy, thought Fabien, he knows not what he does, and turns his hand against me in the sickness of his mind.

"Léon," he asked, "what madness is this which has come upon you? Would you prove me indeed a coward in causing me to wound a wine-crazed child? Put up your rapier and have done with this causeless quarrel. I have no part in it, and sought only to fish you from the meshes of a net. There, take my hand and make an end of folly and unreason."

For answer Léon struck him heavily upon the mouth with his hard-clenched fist. Fabien

reeled and fell, and when he rose a stream of blood was flowing from his lip and slowly dribbled down on his satin doublet.

"Follow!"

Without another word he led the way behind the chapel where the moonlight fell upon a patch of soft, smooth sward. He was far the better swordsman, with longer reach and firmer wrist, a practised blade which answered to a clear, cool brain; opposed to him, a beardless youth, transformed by poisoned drink into a madman, whose fury rendered him incapable even of self-defence.

Fabien sighed as he cast his cloak behind him on the turf, and ere he drew his sword he sought once more by gentle reasoning to stay his companion's rage; but Léon was in no mood for reason; the cold voice only maddened him, and he struck without warning at his friend's unguarded breast. Fabien leaped aside and caught the lunging point upon his arm; it slid along its way, ripping the satin sleeve from wrist to shoulder.

"A foul thrust, Léon," he murmured reproachfully, and stood on guard. "'Twill

bring you shame when you remember it to-morrow."

Léon heeded nothing. With a snarl of rage he sprang at his antagonist, the once-loved Fabien seeming to his disordered brain but a thing to kill. Again and again he flung his supple body forward, lunging at throat and chest in deadly hate; and Fabien, with ever-watchful eye and shifting foot, parried each vicious thrust, and in return gave none; the while his calm voice rose above the slithering rasp of steel, pleading with a madman's lust for blood, calling, soothing, till his words were drowned in the jarring crash of rapier hilts tight locked in uplifted hands.

Once more they swung apart; once more the boy plunged fiercely at his foe, and then of a sudden his blade was twisted from his grasp, spun in the moonlight like a silver wheel and stuck, quivering, in the earth. Fabien laughed.

With the cry of a wounded beast, Léon stooped and seized his rapier, attacking with an open guard; no longer guided by the duel's code, but in blind fury lashing out before him, as though he held a whip, till Fabien, fending

off the storm of blows, could scarce prevent his foe from rushing on his point.

"In God's name, Léon, have a care!" he cried, and retreating swiftly, caught his heel in the throat-strap of his discarded cloak, tripped, and fell prone upon his back. A thin, keen rapier licked out, met flesh, and pinned him to the earth.

For one long moment Léon stood, his fingers clutched in his dripping locks, staring in horror at the stricken thing that quivered at his feet; and then, with a cry of half unhuman agony, fell sobbing beside his friend. The cry was taken up and flung from stone to stone, and echoed "Fabien! Fabien!" till it sank to a stifled whisper and was lost in the lapping sea.

With a rush of blinding tears the sobered boy poured forth a torrent of endearments where a moment since fell curses and abuse. With lips to cheek and brow he babbled incoherently a pitiless storm of self-denunciation, a soul-racked prayer launched wildly at unheeding heaven, a passionate appeal that a dying man might live.

"Forgive! Forgive!" he moaned. "Ah, holy

God, I know not what I did! Fabien, forgive! Forgive!"

Fabien smiled and feebly pressed his hand; the black blood gushed from his speechless lips; he shivered and was still.

Long Léon sat, as a mother might cling to the body of her babe, rocking dumbly to and fro, the limp head pillowed on his breast till his vest was stained with a crimson smudge. At length he rose, and lifting the burden in his arms, staggered beneath its weight toward the chapel. The oaken door swung inward to a pressure of his foot; a draught of chilling air puffed out in his fevered face, and a frightened bat swirled by, brushing his cheek with a clammy wing. With laboured breath he groped his way along the ghostly aisles, tottering on to the chancel rail, where the unlit candles slit the murky gloom, and the Christ hung limp and pallid from his cross. At the altar's foot he laid his burden down, then fled—like a thing accursed—he knew not whither.

The grating winches dragged up an anchor chain; the clumsy hull swung round in an ebb-

ing tide, and the fruit ship *Santa Baba*, bound with her cargo for Le Harve, slid silently out to sea.

The sailors looked askance at a huddled figure lying on the deck, whose fine, patrician face was hidden in his outstretched arms, whose once rich garments, now soiled and disarranged, showed ugly stains, which caused the watch to cross himself and mumble a half-forgotten prayer. But the grim-faced captain lolling at the helm gazed calmly across his bows and whistled an idle tune, for gold was rare and throats were cheap in Naples, and if the Signore paid a double fare in good and lawful coin, the Signore might seek the devil in the way which pleased him best. *Basta!* It was no affair of his!

The huddled figure tossed in sleepless agony until the moon went down. A cold wind rose and flung gaunt, white-lipped waves against the vessel's side, each an accusing, clamorous tongue that cried out "Fabien! Fabien!" and plunged away into the darkness. The mainmast, with its heavy spar, towered upwards in the gloom, like some gigantic cross whence

the phantom of a colossal Christ looked down reproachfully, and in the vessel's wake old Mount Vesuvius sank behind the curving sea, his flaring crest a crimson stain against the sky.

CHAPTER II

Vive le Roi! The crowd still shouted, although the king had already passed by, and the last of his escort was disappearing round the corner; but their monarch had smiled most genially upon them, so now they stood about in noisy knots, discussing the subject of the king's return from Rouen. True, there was nothing of special moment in this event, yet Louis passed not every day, and a train of clattering men at arms in glittering harness and polished helms was ample cause to bring the people flocking from their doors, even without the presence of the royal leader.

Louis had sat upon his chestnut stallion that plunged and curveted beneath his master's rein, while at his side rode a favorite courtier, Gaston Duc de la Fère, a new-made husband with mended morals and a splendid velvet cloak, who scattered silver pennies from a purse which, rumor said, was inexhaustible; so the rabble

shouted joyously and forgot that Louis' fist was hidden in his glove.

Tailors were there who dissertated wisely on the cost and fit of the riders' hose and doublets, artisans and smiths still reeking from the forge, cobblers and dusty bakers, a swarm of wriggling, grime-stained children tangled in strangers' legs and bawling lustily; shrill-tongued mothers who gossiped among the men or sought in frantic unavail for their offspring lost in the shifting crowd. Beggars of every unwashed hue whined pleadingly for sous, or deftly explored unguarded pockets to spare their owner's time in making change. Cripples were much in evidence, their maimed and bandaged limbs seeming marvelously restored to health and vigour in the scramble for scattered coins. And dogs —dogs that fought among themselves in riotous delight—on any pretext—claiming the interest and attention of the people next to the king himself.

Before the doorway of the jeweller stood the blazoned carriage of the Marquis Dubris, surrounded by a gaping throng of idlers who waited for a glimpse of the lordly owner; some in

simple curiosity, others to fling a jest or two of spiced but unsavoury flavour, for the marquis was not a favourite with the poor of Paris.

Directly across the way stood the shop of Monsieur Dreux, a maker of artistic gowns, who boasted that his customers numbered the richest Parisian *belles*, and even a haughty dame or two from the court itself. From an iron balcony on the building's upper story a handsome woman with splendid eyes, young, but no *ingénue*, looked boldly out on the scene below; she waited in impatience for her carriage to appear, and if one might judge by the grim compression of her lips, the driver would rue his tardiness and hold the memory long. Many a gaze was lifted to the balcony, and many a whisper sank into too willing ears.

"Who is she?" asked a soldier in a dirty leather coat and muddy boots, as he craned his neck for a better view. "*Ciel!* the face and figure of an angel!"

A painted girl beside him tittered in reply: "An angel, yes, but her wings are like your boots, *mon ami;* 'twill take a mighty rubbing

to make them clean again. God save you, sir, she is Madame le Corbeau!"

A barber, standing at the soldier's elbow, laughed, then vastly pleased to find an easy auditor, poured forth a volley of unsought information, the while his thumb and finger worked unconsciously, as though his shears were snipping at his listener's straggling locks:

"Ah, sir, you well may stare at Madame le Corbeau—the most beautiful of women. Paris holds none else to equal her. What! You have never heard of her? *Morbleu!* my friend, surely you're a stranger in the city. Madame le Corbeau? Every one knows Madame le Corbeau—and best of all—the devil. Why, sir, she was once the mistress of the Duc de la Fère—he who passed just now on the king's left hand—but they say she spent his gold so fast that the wary duc took fright, departing with such suddenness as to leave his feathered hat behind. How do I know these things? Sir, I am honoured by the confidence of many courtly gentlemen who chat agreeably while I dress their hair, and—your pardon, sir—I may say without offence that your own needs trimming sadly. My

shop is just round the corner; you cannot miss it if you try. But speaking of the duc—did you note his face when he spied Miladi on the balcony? No? *Mon Dieu!* his cheek flushed red as his crimson sash, and he straightway scattered pennies among the beggars to cover his confusion. But, ah, the lady! Ha! No boggling there! She looked straight at him with half-closed eyes, and smiled disdainfully. La, sir, some say the story has another side, but what may one pick for the wagging of such idle tongues? For my part——"

Here the mouth of the little man was stopped abruptly by a sudden excited movement in the crowd. Across the street from the jeweller's doorway stepped the Marquis Dubris, a short, coarse man with a bloated countenance, thick overhanging brows and a mouth of cruel insolence. The idlers fell back in precipitance to give him passage to his carriage, when Bobo, a hunchback beggar, jostled by the press, sought safety in a hobbling flight toward the curb. Alas for poor Bobo's haste! His wooden crutches slid on the polished stones, and the beggar, to save a painful fall, clutched wildly at

the skirt of the marquis's satin coat. The marquis, with a brutal oath, lifted his cane and struck—struck viciously, and Bobo fell, his cheek laid bare as by a sabre cut; and, rolling on his face, held up one feeble arm to shield his defenceless head. Once more the cane hissed through the air and caught the hunchback sharply on his curving spine. Bobo screamed out in agony, sobbed, and was still, while from the motley throng of watchers an angry growl broke forth, rose and fell in a storm of hoots and curses. They hissed and groaned, but with a rabble's cowardice remained inactive, venting their rage in threatening cries and execrations.

The marquis, hemmed in on every side and spurred to boiling wrath, lifted his heavy stick again, when a firm white hand shot out, closed on the cane, and wrenched it from his grasp. A roar of joy burst out from a hundred throats; the marquis spun upon his heel and faced a priest —a tall, pale priest, whose great grey eyes looked calmly into his own and waited. For a moment taken at a disadvantage, the noble fumed and spluttered helplessly, whereat a great laugh went up and stung him like a banderillero's dart in

the flesh of a baited bull. His face turned ghastly pale, then livid in his passion; a foul oath fell from his purple lips, and his sword flashed out, its point presented at the broad, deep chest of the priest who barred his path.

"Out of my way," screamed the maddened marquis, "or I'll truss you like a fowl!"

"Peace!" said the priest. "Put up your sword."

The voice was low and passionless, unstirred by any touch of anger or of fear, but firm, unwavering as the tone of a mother to her erring child, while Dubris glared at him with a look of rancorous hate, his weak chin trembling in impotent fury.

"Stand back!" he shouted.

"No."

"Then die!" the marquis shrieked, and stepped backward for his thrust.

Through the huddled rabble a gasp of horror surged, and sank into breathless silence. No hand was raised to save the father's blood; no man to fling himself between that splinter of gleaming steel and the priest who staked his life for a hunchbacked beggar moaning at his feet;

and so they waited in stupid fascination while one might count a score, watching the figures in the centre of their human ring. The nobleman, a painted peacock, in lace and brocaded satin, his vulgar face distorted and inflamed with fury, his thick, coarse figure crouched to back his lunge; the priest, calm, motionless, unmoved, in the simple garments of his holy calling; his spotless white serge cassock fell from throat to sandal, while over it a wide, black mantle hung, its loose end flung like a toga's fold across his shoulder. The sinewy arm, which might have warded off the threatened stroke, hung passive at his side, but the cold grey eyes, which looked unflinchingly from their pallid patrician frame, held the marquis chained as a man may hold a beast.

Who can say what passed through the marquis's mind in that one hovering instant of inaction, when passion warred with mental cowardice — when pride must strike or stoop? Whether his stagnant soul shrank pitifully in conscious awe of the holy robe which clothed an unarmed antagonist—whether the very evil in him cowered, abashed, before that passive mien

of power and purity, or if in the features of the man himself, thin, delicate, refined, he read the name of master—the master who scorned him for what he was—who looked beneath his strutting feathers and saw him in his nakedness, a thing ashamed.

The sword-hand shook; the glittering point which menaced the priest's breast wavered, then, like the marquis's shifting eyes, dropped slowly to the earth.

Stooping, the priest raised Bobo from the ground and held the half unconscious beggar in his arms, unmindful of the trickling ooze which dyed his vestments with a crimson smudge; then turning to Dubris, he spoke scarce audibly, his low, rich voice for the first time trembling in its sorrowful intensity:

"Go you in peace. . . . I judge you not . . . but remember, sir, that where you sow . . . there also shall you reap . . . and when, in passion, you seek a fellow-creature's blood . . . may God forgive you—you know not what you do!"

The marquis hung his head, and without a word, turned round and shuffled toward his carriage. A snarling murmur rose; hard hands

stretched out to drag him in the dust, and vengeful curses bubbled to bearded lips; but the father raised his hand, and a sudden hush fell on the rabble, while the nobleman, his naked sword still held in his shaking grasp, crept like a sentenced criminal into his coach. The horses plunged through the scattering crowd; a white, affrighted face looked for an instant from the carriage window, and was gone.

The priest, with the bleeding beggar in his arms, strode silently away, while a handsome woman, watching from a balcony, clutched at the iron railing with her jewelled hands, and wondered. Her splendid eyes still followed him till his coal-black cowl was swallowed up in the ragged crowd that pressed upon his heels.

CHAPTER III

THE candles in the *salon* of Madame le Corbeau burned brightly from their silver candelabra, and beneath them half a score of merry, gay-dressed cavaliers were chatting with as many women in rouge and satin. Some gossiped laughingly, passing in and out upon the balcony through wide rear windows reaching to the floor, while others stood beside a table spread with fruit and wine, jesting across the rims of their brimming glasses; a brilliant picture with its changing tints of silk and velvet, its flash of colour, a glint of gold, and the rich appointments of the room itself—a shade too pure in taste for the coarse-tongued laughter shrilling from a painted woman's lips.

A girl with a reckless face and a spiteful mouth, seated before a harpsichord, strummed noisily.

"*Peste*, Lizette!" cried a tawdry beauty called La Rose, "you set one's teeth on edge.

Come, give us a song in which we all may join —a merry one—well—anything you please."

"As you will," replied Lizette in a careless tone, and, turning to several gentlemen standing near, said sneeringly: "La Rose is begging that I play 'King Grape,' a song which was written by her latest lover. I'm sure 'twill give her pleasure—and besides—she can air her cracked contralto. Come, Messieurs; I believe you know the chorus."

La Rose blushed furiously and turned away, but on being urged by many laughing gentlemen, was at last appeased, and sang in a deep, rich voice the rollicking lines of a drinking song:

"King Grape is a king of kings, I ween;
He holds his court in a vineyard green,
'Neath the shade of a lordly vine,
Where the blood of the bursting fruit runs red,
And the gleam of a golden sun is shed
On rivers of sparkling wine.
His crystal flagon is tossed on high—
A ruby splash in a sapphire sky—
And is borne on the wind's swift wings,
From the North to South, from the West to East,
To prince and beggar, to sinner and priest,
Who bow to the king of kings."

Here the company took up the chorus noisily, singing it twice over:

"Then hail to the king
Whose treasures cling
To the breath of the winds that blow,
And the nectar that drips
To the eager lips
Of the thirsty world below."

As the chorus ended, a clapping of hands was heard, and Raymond Delese, a handsome, boyish cavalier in pearl-gray silk, entered and advanced to the group of singers.

"*Brava! Brava!*" he cried delightedly.

"Oh ho!" laughed La Rose. "The vanity of man, applauding a song which he wrote himself!" And the guests joined heartily in the jesting welcome to the young musician.

"No, no, dear friends," he protested smilingly, "I deny that charge at least. I applauded the singing rather than the song, but foremost of all I clapped for your leader—peerless La Rose. Ah, little one," he added, with a laugh, "that contralto should be heard in opera."

La Rose placed two white hands behind her back. "I cannot applaud your flattery," she lisped, "as I might your music, and especially when the varnish of your compliment is, alas! so thin; but come, I will reward your gallantry"

—she pinned a rose upon his coat—"for, Raymond, you're a clever knave . . . and clever knaves are rare."

Raymond raised the flower to his lips. "By proxy," he murmured, with a meaning smile, "till the knave may claim a more responsive kiss."

La Rose made promise with her eyes; then turning to her friends, called cheerily: "Come, another glass and another verse to prove appreciation of the song and the saintly rogue who wrote it."

They sang it merrily in concert, while Raymond waved La Rose's fan in lieu of a leader's *bâton;* but the closing lines were interrupted by the sounds of a mighty cheering on the street and the lights of torches flashing through the open windows.

"Listen!" cried Lizette, a dainty butterfly who fluttered near the balcony.

"What is it?" asked another of M. Duval, who stood beside her. "Hark! they are coming nearer!"

"It seems," said the cavalier, with a glance toward the street, "to be a line of maskers on their way to a festival."

"A festival! What festival?"

"Upon my soul, I cannot say."

"Upon mine, I can," laughed Raymond ruefully, "I have just escaped from that murderous procession!" The guests pressed round him, eager for an explanation. "I was being driven hither when my carriage was rudely stopped by that howling horde of masked barbarians; they blocked the streets completely — hooting, screeching, cutting capers that would cast despair on the king's menagerie. My driver swore superbly, but the rabble gave him better than he sent, and at length four burly bandits clambered through my carriage windows, insisting that I help along their festival in the matter of small coin."

"What!" gasped La Rose. "You were robbed?"

Raymond shook his head. "No, not exactly robbed—persuaded. You see, their arguments were backed by short, fat clubs and jagged paving stones; so I merely bowed to their superior knowledge of my welfare, exchanging my coin for wholesome information. Look!" he laughed as he held up his open purse. "As empty as

my wine-glass. I must beg a sou or two from my generous friends, or foot it home in the early morning."

"But what is the meaning of the celebration?" asked Violette, as she passed his wine.

"Well," said Raymond, "purely as a guess I should say that the barbers were giving a fête in honour of some one who has cut the throat of some one else. The barbers rejoice. Heaven wonders which can be the greater villain—the slayer or the slain, and the devil laughs, for he has one rogue, and will get the other."

"What a ghastly jest!" simpered Violette, and followed the laughing guests, who were passing out upon the balcony to watch the maskers in the street below.

"Are you coming, Raymond?" called La Rose.

"Thanks, no," he answered, "I've had enough of the barbers' handiwork; they shaved me clean."

Raymond turned and crossed to the room's remaining occupant, a man who, during all the merriment, had sat apart in gloomy silence, listening with ill-concealed annoyance to the

rasping clatter of their irritating tongues. He was of middle age and heavy frame, with strong and not unhandsome features, marked by learning and experience; a face of power, yet shadowed by a look of weariness and suffering, a look of longing for a passion still unsatisfied—a hope beyond his hope. Many envied him for his fame and wealth,—the first physician of his day, with a private fortune equalling that of the Duc de la Fère, King Louis' favourite; but others read, in that stern unbending countenance, the stamp of sullen cruelty, where Fate had slashed him with her lines of bitterness and pain. And yet, no patient was ever turned away for lack of fees, and the kindly ring in his deep bass voice belied the harshness of his thin, straight lips and dogged chin. The doctor's cup was a cup whose joy had spilled; he gave, and forgot the gifts; but his harvests were choked with the thistles.

"*Bon soir*, Jardin!" called Raymond cheerily. "Why so melancholy?"

"Nothing, nothing," the doctor answered lazily. "I was merely thinking."

"An evil habit, friend; get over it. But be-

fore you mend your ways tell me your opinion of La Rose."

"Honestly," the doctor asked, "or shall I mix my medicine with sugar?"

Raymond smiled. "Thank you, no; I can swallow it without the sweetening. Well?"

"Harmless."

"Why, what do you mean?"

Jardin yawned and tapped his forehead with his finger. "Weak. . . . Pretty enough to look at beyond a doubt—sweet as the flower whose name she bears, and yet—her brains would less than fill my silver snuff-box." He offered it politely. "Try it, Raymond; it clears the head. Sneeze . . . and forget her!"

The snuff was smilingly declined; Jardin resumed:

"La Rose is a happy soul; but as I said before, quite harmless. A flower which man may pluck and throw away at will; it is neither rare nor poisonous."

"Philosopher, sage, and botanist!" laughed Raymond. "What variety of flower is . . . Le Corbeau?"

"*Mort Dieu*, a poppy!" cried the doctor,

straightening in his chair. "That deadly bloom, as beautiful as deadly, and he who dares inhale its subtle fragrance is lulled to slumber and to dreams of heaven!"

He paused, then asked abruptly:

"Raymond, did you never eat opium?"

"*Hélas!*" sighed Raymond in mock dejection. "It is the one vice I do not possess."

"Then don't acquire it!" Jardin rose, walked the floor, and spoke with harsh intensity. "A man who becomes its victim is lost forever. While under its baleful spell he is happy, content, at peace with himself and all the world, although he knows he is slowly drifting to hideous death; but take away his drug—and the horrors of hell have claimed him—body, mind, and soul! No rest save in his sweet indulgence —no peace save with his tyrant!" The doctor clenched his hands and added in a low, fierce whisper: "And like the opium-eater is the thrice-accursed wretch . . . who loves Corbeau!"

"My dear Jardin," said Raymond in deep concern, "you seem to be serious. I had never supposed that——"

"Yes," replied his friend, and sank wearily to his seat, "I speak straight from the heart—what little she has left of it. Ah, Raymond, I would give my wealth—to the last poor sou—for your sunny disposition and philosophy; you, whose days pass by like the music of your merry songs."

"Perhaps my tune may change in the final roasting," the musician ventured with a grin.

"Perhaps . . . and yet you are happy. You write your dainty ballads, as sparkling as the wine you love next best to music. Paris loves them, and Paris loves you . . . and why? Because you are cheerful. Because you are a wit. Because you never take life seriously, and your wine of youth has not gone flat and bitter. Man, man, I envy you. You have a place in life."

"And you, Jardin?" asked Raymond, with a touch of sadness in his voice.

"I—God help me—have eaten of the poppy flower!"

Raymond placed his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder.

"Come, come, Jardin, you grow despondent.

When love becomes too heavy for the heart to bear, then drown it in champagne." He filled two glasses, placing one upon a table at the doctor's elbow. "Come, drink with me," he cried, "drink and forget. You'll find it even better than your snuff. And, after all," he added in a tone of banter, "what is love but a little monster who contrives to crush us when once we let him get the whip-hand." He raised his glass: "And so, *sacrebleu!* you should never let him get it!"

The doctor shook his head and pushed away the proffered wine.

"No, no, my friend, your advice has come too late. I've *lost* the whip-hand, and I only know the lash—so keen—so cruel—God! . . . how well she lays it on!"

For a moment neither spoke. Each, busied with his thoughts, sat listening to the boisterous shouts of maskers in the street below and the ceaseless chatter of the guests upon the balcony. Then Raymond broke the silence.

"Jardin," he said, "your pardon if I touch a wound, but I could never understand how a man of your intelligence became Le Corbeau's

prey, when your iron will might set you free, . . . or make you master."

Jardin's reply came slowly, truthfully, but tinged with scoffing self-contempt for the weakness which conceived his misery:

"A sled on a mountain side—the trip is easier down than up. . . . First I was Corbeau's physician . . . then I was Corbeau's slave. For her I deserted my wife and my children; for her I squander my wealth and wreck my happiness . . . and for what? To be tapped with her ivory fan and called by silly pet names . . . to catch at a few stale crumbs of favour tossed in my face, and then be cast aside for men whom I loathe. Men like that blatant ass, Duchant—the poet and novelist who wrings his hands and makes vile rhymes—writes stories of love that would shock a vagrant. Men who buy their aristocracy for a handful of dirty gold. Ah, Raymond, it sickens me to the soul. I *hate* this place, with its shallow coarseness, its odour of stale wine, its taint of sin . . . and yet I come . . . come always . . . and for her!"

"Still," said Raymond thoughtfully, "she is different from the rest. Call her heartless—

cruel—what you will—and beneath it all lurk polish and refinement, a stamp of birth which even such a life as hers can never quite obliterate. Tell me, Jardin, do you know Le Corbeau's name? Not the nickname we call her by, but that which her father gave her."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, I know her name and who her parents were, but am not at liberty to tell you, since it came to me by accident, and I gave a pledge of silence. But this much I may say—the best and proudest blood of France is in her veins."

"Crossed with a dash of Satan's," suggested Raymond.

"Aye, crossed with a dash of Satan's," Jardin assented bitterly, then added in a burst of passionate vehemence: "I tell you, Raymond, the woman is a devil—a heartless, venomous devil, who grinds the hopes of men beneath her heel, and laughs at it—laughs at it! Sometimes she taunts me till I could strangle her . . . but when she smiles . . . ah, then, my friend, I sell my soul—the price of a curving lip."

The deep voice ceased, and the great physician, whom Paris looked upon as a man of iron,

buried his face between his two strong hands, and trembled.

Raymond touched him gently on the shoulder. "Jardin," he urged, "leave Paris for a month; the change will do you good. Go to my château and rest. My horses and wine are yours. Ride! Drink, my friend, drink as deep as you will, but put Le Corbeau from your mind . . . for once and for all. Go, Jardin; you are far too good a man to break upon the wheel."

The doctor looked up wearily and pressed his companion's hand.

"I thank you, Raymond," he murmured sadly, "I thank you from my heart, but your kindness comes too late. The drug is in the blood . . . to take it from me—well—you know the rest."

"Go on—and nothing can be gained. You yourself have said it."

Jardin laughed harshly: "A game at cards between the devil and despair . . . and the devil has the deal!"

"A losing game for you should either win," urged Raymond earnestly.

"I know, I know," the doctor frowned, "and

yet—the turning of a single trick would make me master where I've been the slave."

"And you hesitate, Jardin? And why?"

"Because——"

There was silence for a moment, and the doctor dropped his eyes in conscious shame.

"Because . . . my bread is the bread of the poppy flower. I've eaten . . . and must eat."

CHAPTER IV

FURTHER speech between the friends was at this point rudely interrupted, not only by the returning guests with noisy comments on the barbers' festival, but by the entrance of Jardin's *bête noire*, the poet. Monsieur Duchant was a man of some thirty years, fat, but effeminate, with round and rolling eyes, which showed the whites beneath; he wore a much-slashed suit of sapphire blue, a sword, and an air of lofty patronage.

The new arrival rushed effusively toward the guests, who received him with a babel of clattering tongues—his own meanwhile, like a ribbon in the wind, fluttering incessantly with greetings and self-contained acknowledgments.

"*Peste*, he is here!" exclaimed Jardin disgustedly. "The poet! *Dieu!* Raymond, in pity's name, suppress that conceited pig! His ceaseless drivelling drives me mad! He thinks the whole wide world is grovelling at his mincing feet to hear him read his poetry. His

poetry! Faugh! Quarrel with him, Raymond —run him through, and be my friend for life."

Raymond grinned, but his answer was lost in shouts of "*Vive Duchant!* Long life to the poet!" which echoed from the laughing company, while La Rose poured wine and presented it to the beaming bard.

"A glass," she cried, "to the jeweller of rhyme, and then I'm sure, if we plead with him, he will honour us with his latest verse."

"Duchant! Duchant!" cheered the clamouring guests as the poet bowed and smirked delightedly.

"A thousand thanks, dear friends," he lisped; "it is a joy ineffable to live in the hearts of courage, youth, and loveliness. And I? I claim them all."

Jardin sighed hopelessly and shrugged his shoulders, but the poet smiled and sipped his wine in serene complacence.

"And now, Monsieur," begged Violette, "the verses."

"Alas!" he murmured languidly and raised his bovine eyes, "my latest verses are not quite

finished, but I know the theme will meet your just approval. The poem is called . . . *Corbeau, the Sorceress.*"

"Good! Good!" declared his listeners, but the doctor bit his lip, and turned away like a man in pain.

"First tell me," begged Duchant, "has Le Corbeau yet returned?"

"No," said La Rose, "but we expect her any moment. She's at the theatre with Monsieur Chatillon, and oh! Émile, you should see the gown she wears—black satin—with a full-blown poppy flower pinned at the breast—another in her hair. Poor Chatillon," she laughed, "I pity him! But we have a treat in store this evening; Corbeau has promised to sing for us to the accompaniment of her new guitar."

"Ha!" exclaimed Duchant, "it is so that I have pictured her in verse—a guitar with a crimson ribbon. Strange that I should hit the mark without a hint. Prophetic!" He turned to the other ladies and continued volubly: "Now, first the inspiration of this poem came to me on Wednesday last as I sat alone in my summer garden."

"Come, tell us of it," the ladies urged, pushing him down into an easy-chair and crowding round him in their eagerness to hear, while the flattered scribbler simpered happily and began his recitation.

"Oh, the accursed bandit!" the doctor muttered angrily to Raymond. "An iron pike thrust down his throat would fail to stop him gabbling of his poetry. Can you do naught to quiet him? *Pardieu!* He maddens me!"

"Better still," laughed Raymond, "I'll make him talk. The tongue of a fool—when long enough—is a rope to hang him by. Pray bear with him until I knot the noose." He stepped toward the close-packed circle and said protestingly: "Ladies, ladies, this is unfair. Be not so greedy with Monsieur Duchant, when we all are eager for his latest and his greatest poem."

The poet rose with a sweeping bow: "An honour, Monsieur Delese, an honour. But there—I shall call you Raymond; for are we not brothers in art—you the musician and I the poet?"

"Monsieur, you overwhelm me," said Ray-

mond modestly. "I love my music, it is true, but never dared to lift my eyes to the height on which stands the great Duchant."

Some one tittered, but the poet puffed his chest and patted Raymond's shoulder with a much beringed and condescending hand.

"Courage, my boy," he rippled soothingly, "I've heard your music, and believe me, it has merit—a little crude, perhaps, but, on the whole, I pronounce it good."

The doctor laughed. Duchant went on without a pause: "Keep at it, Raymond, and do not despair, and some fine day—when you least expect it—success will come to you . . . even as it came to me."

Raymond answered solemnly, but with a twinkle in his eye: "And when it comes . . . may I hope to wear my laurel wreath with half the modesty of the bard, whom France has *not yet* learned to love. And now, Monsieur, I pray you tell us of the Sorceress."

The poet swallowed Raymond's doubtful compliment, cleared his throat, and raised a flabby hand for silence.

"First," he said, "I tell how Le Corbeau took

her name, for you know, Messieurs, she is called Corbeau because her hair is black as the raven's wing. And here, I have a dainty bit which I may call—er—strong. *Hem!* Then I describe her violet eyes—those wondrous eyes which no man fathoms."

"And God help him who tries!" the doctor muttered in a grim aside.

Duchant continued: "I then weave on the story of how Le Corbeau wields her sceptre o'er the hearts of men, for she is, indeed, a sorceress, and where she wills . . . her lovers must obey. The verse is good, but spare me the rhyme—a poet's memory—bad—detestable! It is in this wise. . . . Le Corbeau lies asleep—a sweet, calm sleep; her fragrant breath alternately ebbs and flows through parted lips—red lips that smile in conscious loveliness above a row of teeth which put our fairest pearls to shame." The poet bowed to the clapping of many hands. "The jealous lashes hide her lustrous eyes, and lie in sable curves upon her cheek . . . a winsome cheek, tinged with the peach-blow blush of youth and purity."

"*Bravo! Bravo!*"

"Delicious!" chirped La Rose. "The lines are like a sip of sweetest wine."

"And that last lie," whispered Raymond to Jardin, "is worthy of the polished Ananias."

Duchant bowed low at La Rose's compliment, and spoke once more:

"Her snowy bosom falls, to rise again, like dimpling, sun-kissed waves upon the sea, while one small hand lies captive 'neath her head, caressed by raven tresses. One white, white elbow from the couch's edge peeps at a saucy ankle half concealed——"

"Hold! Hold, master poet!" shouted Raymond boisterously.

"Silence!" called La Rose. "Go on, Duchant."

The poet frowned, and continued haltingly: "And then—and then Le Corbeau sighs, and restless grows——"

"Tickled by some unpoetic fly," the musician interjected, with a laugh, which was taken up by all the assembled gentlemen.

"God bless the boy!" the doctor breathed with fervour, while La Rose reproached the offender angrily.

"Raymond, how dare you!"

"I'm sorry," he said in mock contrition, "but I only made a dramatic climax, that was all. The scene was incomplete without the fly."

"It was most unkind. I blush for you," she answered, and turned consolingly to the ruffled poet: "Never mind him, dear Émile; go on with your pretty verses."

"The poem is spoiled," said Duchant in a surly tone, "and by Monsieur Delese, who seems to have small heart for literature."

"No, no," they urged; "go on, go on!" and slightly mollified by the soothing voice of flattery, he once more cleared his throat and began in hesitation:

"The—er—the rest I may not tell for fear of jealousy; and besides—it is a secret."

"Tell us," pleaded Violette. "The part we most wish to hear. A secret? Ho ho! Delightful!"

"Friends," said Duchant, as he clasped his hands and rolled his egg-like eyes, "I love Corbeau!"

"Most natural," laughed La Rose, "and so do I."

"And I," "And I," "And I," rose a cry from every side.

"And now the secret. Fill your glasses—full." The poet wet his lips with wine and whispered impressively: "The secret . . . she loves me in return."

From the company burst a shout of laughter in which even the ladies joined, while again the doctor muttered in a hoarse aside:

"Misguided fool! Le Corbeau loves Corbeau—naught else beneath the stars."

"Ah, laugh if you will," said the scribbler, unabashed. "I tell you but the truth; and listen: last night I dreamed a dream—so strange and terrible that I needs must weave its substance in the loom of verse."

The guests pressed closely about Duchant, whose weak voice shrilled excitedly as he told his tale in pedantic declamation:

"I dreamed I sought Corbeau and told her of my love with passion's power. And she, in like words, sobbed the story of her heart. She loved me utterly, and begged with many tears that we should fly to some far country, there to be alone. I, eager for the journey, took her in my arms,

when lo! . . . Jardin sprang at me with a naked sword."

"*Sangdieu!* and so I would!" the doctor growled, his stern eyes turning on the loose-tongued dreamer, his thin lips straightening in a hard, white line; but the poet, lost in admiration of his own choice words, pursued his theme to its tragic *denouement.*

"Quick from its scabbard leaped my eager blade. Clash on clash rerang the music of our steel, and I, retreating from the fury of his thrusts, stumbled and fell—to feel Jardin's sharp sword's point press my throat. . . . And as I prostrate lay, gasping a prayer or two, I saw Le Corbeau creep—as creeps the clean-limbed tiger—crouch and spring. . . . And with her eyes agleam with hell's hot fire . . . her jewelled dagger smote Jardin . . . while from her scarlet lips burst, shrill, the cry, 'Émile! For my Émile!' . . . and I awoke."

The poet paused, and silence for a moment reigned unbroken, till a white-cheeked woman murmured, "Wonderful!"

"Ghastly!" breathed La Rose.

"Ridiculous!" scoffed Raymond, wheeling

on the dreamer suddenly: "Now let me be a Daniel to your king, Duchant, and tell you . . . that Le Corbeau cares no more for you than for an idle puff of wind. Pray mark the simile. Love you? *Pah!* Were the devil himself to come in gentlemanly attire, and were he proper and passing good to look upon, I swear Corbeau would kiss his sooty visage from chin to forelock!"

"Stop! On your life be silent!" the poet burst out angrily.

"*Bravo!*" exclaimed Jardin in unctuous joy. "At last!"

Raymond paid no heed to the flaming face and trembling hands of the outraged rhymster made furious by his speech, but continued smilingly:

"She kissed me seven times on yesterday, and put her splendid arms——"

"A lie! A lie! In your teeth, Monsieur Delese, you lie!" And in a rage, which made him even more absurd than his declamation, Duchant whipped out his sword.

In an instant wild confusion reigned; the ladies screamed and rushed for safety through

the open doors and out upon the balcony, while several gentlemen hastened to interpose between the two contestants.

"Come, come, Duchant," said one, "it was nothing but a jest. Don't take the man in earnest. Why, he's laughing at you."

"There are ladies present," another urged. "Put up your blades."

"Stand back, Messieurs!" Duchant cried angrily. "The quarrel is mine, not yours! Draw, Delese! I wait you! Draw!"

"It is quite impossible to fight you here," said Raymond, with his blandest smile; "but if the ladies will permit, and you follow me to the street below, I believe the matter might be settled to your taste. Then, too, to-morrow, you may write another sonnet, telling how you swallowed half my sword—a dainty bit which we might call—er—strong."

The doctor laughed delightedly, but the poet stamped his foot in fury.

"Sir, if you are not a coward—draw!"

"Now, by St. Gris," said Raymond, as he drew his sword, "I needs must damn poor Purgatory with another poet!"

The thin blades gritted one against the other with a rasping hiss, amid the throaty squeaks of women and the plaudits of several gentlemen, who loudly offered wagers on the duel's outcome, while the doctor rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of delight, and cried out merrily:

"Oh, the glory of it! *Dieu!* . . . Don't kill him, Raymond — only split his everlasting tongue!"

Raymond held his opponent easily, his slender body bent in supple grace, and played Duchant as a cat might tease a mouse, while the poet, on dancing calves, hopped nervously about like grease in a heated griddle, evading the sword that threatened from an hundred points at once. Duchant gave ground, but Raymond pressed relentlessly; a stoop, a lightning feint, and a blade shot deftly across the poet's guard, its keen point disappearing in the roots of his bushy hair; a heave, a backward step, and the rhymester's wig hung dangling from the end of Raymond's sword. A roar of mirth resounded from the watching gentlemen when the poet's pate—as bald as his own fat thumb—shone luminously in the flickering candle light. Du-

chant, made frantic by remorseless banter, flung caution to the winds, and attacked his foe with the fury of a cat; but his madness only served to mar his wig, for Raymond held it in such a way as to catch each wicked thrust, and the hair flew out in tufts. Lunge followed lunge, and passes met repulse, till the fencers reached the centre of the room, and then—a flash of black through the open doorway—a guitar, with an upward swing, which struck the swords apart—and Le Corbeau stood between the duellists.

"Messieurs! . . ." she cried in imperious wrath, "in the devil's name, what means this ruffians' brawl?"

Her eyes flashed fire as she darted a swift, inquiring glance at the two offenders; then, catching sight of the poet's polished scalp and the tattered wig transfixed on Raymond's blade, her anger vanished like a trampled spark, and from its ashes rose an impish peal of madcap laughter.

In an instant the company rushed upon her with excited gestures and a Babel of jabbering tongues, each striving to tell his story in a voice

above the rest, till Le Corbeau clapped her hands upon her ears and broke from the clamorous swarm.

"*Quelle horreur!*" she gasped. "Have you *all* gone mad? Stop! Stop instantly!"

"But listen, Corbeau," the poet spluttered angrily, as he strove to rearrange his damaged wig, "I drew my sword in your defence. I——"

"The man has insulted you with dreams," shouted Raymond above the din, "dreams of such nauseous imbecility as to——"

"'Tis false! I dreamed——"

"Have done!" Le Corbeau cried in a gust of petulance, which fled again as swiftly as it came. "*Pouf!* I feared I had plunged before my time through the crust of purgatory. *Pouf!*"

"But Corbeau——" Duchant still urged.

She placed her hand upon his mouth. "There, there, I know it without the telling. A game of dice—wine that mounted too quickly to the brain——"

"Upon my honour, no! Listen!"

"Well then, a jest—a few hot words, or—or a woman." And Le Corbeau laughed. "Most

likely a woman; but the cause matters little. If there has been a quarrel . . . then fight it out at another time; only, for the present, give me peace and silence. *Dieu!*" she cried, and flung her hands above her head, "my jostled brain is whirling like a top! Will *no one* give me a glass of wine? . . . Ah! thanks, Raymond. There . . . put up your swords."

The two blades slid obediently into their sheaths, and Le Corbeau raised her glass.

"A truce to battle! See," she cried, "our anger sinks with the worthless lees, and only mirth and happiness can swim on the bubbly wine."

Merrily the glasses clinked; the erstwhile duellists shook hands in a solemn pledge of peace, and a semblance of order being at last restored, the company, with one accord, began to beg Le Corbeau for a song.

"What shall I sing?" she asked. "Um—let me see——"

"The 'Picador,'" suggested Raymond. "By all means sing the 'Picador.'"

The others voiced approval; so she smilingly consented.

"But wait!" cried Raymond. "Corbeau is queen, and the queen shall have a throne."

"Good, *mon ami!*" Le Corbeau clapped her hands, and tossed him a wilted poppy flower in reward of gallantry.

Raymond drew an easy-chair to the centre of the room, and bracing it firmly, draped the whole with a crimson coverlet filched from a near-by lounge, then offered his hand to assist the queen in mounting; but the queen, with a laugh, sprang lightly upon her throne, and crossing her slippered feet on the seat of the cushioned chair, perched on its back in regal rakishness—a queen of witches, crowned with the glamour of her own satanic charm.

As Le Corbeau tuned her silver-stringed guitar, she glanced from time to time through half-closed eyes toward the lounging figure of Jardin, who seemed to take no share in the reckless jollity, but sat apart in moody silence like a spectre at the feast. Presently she spoke, her low voice smooth and soft as a kitten's purr, yet laden with the poisoned sting of irony:

"Monsieur Jardin . . . is Madame Jardin . . . dead?"

The doctor scented danger in her tone, and answered cautiously:

"No, madame. . . . I'm in receipt of no such evil tidings."

"Ah! . . . Some other loved one, then, I make no doubt."

"There are none whom I call to mind."

"Pardon, monsieur," she begged in mock humility, while her red lip curled in sneering insolence, "pardon. I feared from your countenance, which, on my soul, does credit to a burial inspector . . . that you had lost some relative."

The doctor met the challenge in her smouldering eyes, and retorted coldly: "No; the roll call is still complete—too complete; but I'm in no mood for merry-making, and beg to be a voiceless listener."

"Then strive to look more cheerful!" she flashed out angrily. "*Ma foi!* You're like a vulture seated on one's bed-post—beak and claws!" She snapped her fingers tauntingly. "*Pish!* . . Be a joyful bird; else . . . spread your gloomy pinions . . . and fly home to your nest."

She flung back her head and laughed; the

company joined her boisterously, but the doctor cursed between his strong, clenched teeth—cursed bitterly, and was once more silent.

"Come, my children," Le Corbeau cried, "we will soothe his sorrowing spirit with the balm of music. Are you ready?"

"All ready!" they answered joyously.

"Then join me in the chorus."

She struck a few swift chords, and sang of the little Picador, a merry tune, with a quaint, abandoned swing, but a touch of pathos in its haunting melody.

"The poor little Picador loved a maid,
But, alas for the Picador's lot!
This maid, so sly, 'had fish to fry,'
Which related to the Picador not.
He told his tale where the moonlight pale
Her long love-lances shot,
But she laughed to scorn her lover lorn,
For she loved the little Picador not."

Here the guests joined hands, and forming a circling chain, danced happily round their chosen queen, as they sang the chorus:

"Dear little Picador—queer little Picador—
Tears are soon forgot;
Frail little Picador—pale little Picador—
She loved the little Picador not."

Le Corbeau glanced toward Jardin, smiled, and again took up the melody:

"The poor little Picador picked guitars,
Though the weather was intensely hot,
But he ne'er once played to suit that maid,
For she loved the little Picador not.
So he's hied him, then, to a fierce bull's pen—
The animal came at a trot—
And the maiden sighed as her lover died,
Though she loved the little Picador not."

CHORUS:

"Bad little Picador—mad little Picador—
For love, his death-wound got;
Bold little Picador—cold little Picador—
She loved the little Picador not.

"The poor little Picador lies at rest
In the graveyard's grassy plot,
And the maiden wept for the swain who slept,
Though she loved the little Picador not.
She digged a grave for her Picador brave,
And hastened from the lonely spot,
Then went her way, and was married that day,
For she loved the little Picador not.

CHORUS:

"Sleep, little Picador—deep, little Picador—
Yours is the ordinary lot,
For a maiden's will is a bitter, bitter pill,
When she loves a little Picador not."

CHAPTER V

When the song was finished and the noisy applause had ceased, they besought her to sing again, but she smiled and shook her head. "No, no, I have sung enough." And when they urged her still, she cut them short. "Have done!" she cried impatiently. "There—that ends it!" then added in a gentler tone: "Ah, by the way, I heard the daintiest little air yesterday, and could not rest until I learned it. Shall I play it for you? Yes? . . . Then listen to its opening chords—half prayer, half hungering love, as though a tempted nun had written it."

She touched her strings in a plaintive melody, which might indeed have stolen from some heart of ashes, when stirred by the breath of its smouldering spark; and as she played, the pleading measure, like a phantom memory, seemed calling to her inner consciousness, each note a footstep leading her away—beyond the glint and glitter of her own salon with its heated air, its lights and laughter—to a fairer world out-

side; to the garden of peace and purity, wherein no poppy flower might bloom, and its gate was barred by the figure of a priest—a tall, pale priest, who looked before him silently . . . and waited.

The music ceased; Le Corbeau sat in reverie, her strange eyes fixed on nothingness, her red lips parted, while her full white bosom rose and fell in quickened respiration; then a shout of laughter, like a jarring discord, broke harshly upon her thought, dragging her back to the coarse reality of life and the grating mirth of her shallow-souled companions.

Raymond bowed obsequiously before her throne. "We are perishing with curiosity," he said. "In the name of pity, save our lives."

"I was thinking," she answered simply.

"So we supposed; but of what?"

"To-day . . . I have seen the strangest sight in Paris."

"You're indeed to be envied," lisped Duchant; "yet, I beg you, share the wonder with your friends less fortunate."

Le Corbeau paused, and once more answered simply:

"I have seen . . . a man."

Again her guests laughed harshly, and the poet asked with a vapid grin: "And is the sight of a man so truly wonderful that the queen of love sits dreaming like a sphinx?"

She turned upon him irritably, a dash of scorn in her barbed reply:

"Oh, I mean a *real* man; not such men as—pardon me—as you!"

"Mercy, O queen!" begged the hard-hit poet, amid the noisy jests of his jeering friends; but the queen continued earnestly:

"Not such men as the King of France is pleased to call his courtiers, whose swords are marks of office and not of valour—men with a million francs and as many vices, whose days and nights are shuffled in a pointless game of idleness. No! I speak of a man with a purpose in life—with courage to back his earnest precepts—a man who fights his battles . . . and wins!"

Jardin looked up with a smile of indolence. "And may I ask," he drawled, "who is this god?"

"A priest."

Again their laughter rose, louder, coarser than before, and a volley of waggish wit was forthwith launched by the mocking revellers.

"Hear her, St. Sebastian!" the poet cried. "The queen of love will take the veil!"

"Has madame lingered at confession?" jeered La Rose.

"*Parbleu!* The poor confessor has my sympathy unbounded," tittered Violette, while Raymond crossed his hands and called out solemnly:

"Hail to the mother superior! I shall say one thousand aves, and buy a waxen candle as large as my astonishment."

The doctor kept his eyes upon the floor, but muttered audibly:

"I fear one nunnery is damned—from chapel to refectory."

"Messieurs! . . . " cried Le Corbeau sharply, half rising in her seat, while a glow of hot resentment flushed her cheeks, "Messieurs! . . . your merriment is most ill-timed—ill-placed—yet it only draws a sharper line between you . . . and the priest whom I called a man!"

"Your pardon," begged Raymond humbly. "Are you, indeed, in earnest?"

"For once in my life—yes. Listen! . . . I stopped for a moment on the Rue St. Denis to leave a few directions with M. Dreux, who makes my gowns; and as I waited on his balcony who should stalk forth from the jeweller's across the way but the Marquis Dubris. Raymond, you know the toad—fat eyes, a puffy, purple face—a thing that French nobility calls a man."

"Why, yes," grinned Raymond, "I know the animal. He walks as though the streets of Paris were an insult to his lordly boots; he hates the rabble as he loves his pride, and has a temper which madame herself might envy."

Le Corbeau smiled.

"Yes, that is he. Well, the streets were greatly crowded, owing to the passing of the king and his fawning popinjay, the Duc de la Fère; and as the marquis strode toward his carriage a dirt-stained beggar ran by accident into his noble paunch. With a curse the marquis raised his ivory cane and struck the poor wretch

across the face, leaving a bloody gash from chin to cheekbone."

"Shame!" cried La Rose, while a sympathetic murmur echoed among the listeners and sank to stillness as Le Corbeau told her story with increasing wrath:

"The *canaille* hissed and hooted, but it only maddened him the more. Again the cane was raised . . . when a passing priest appeared, caught the uplifted arm, and took away the weapon as one might take a rattle from a child."

"Delightful!" Raymond laughed. "And the marquis?"

"Bursting with passion, turned and drew his sword."

"The blackguard!" gasped Duchant. "And then, madame?"

"And then—the marquis bellowed in his fury, glared at the priest with murder in his soul, and ordered him aside. The priest moved not, nor shrank from man or steel. . . . He watched . . . and blocked the way. The marquis cursed him with a name unspeakable, leaped back, and raised his sword-arm for a thrust."

"*Mon Dieu!* Did he strike?" gasped La Rose in horror.

Le Corbeau paid no heed, but continued slowly, her great eyes glowing with suppressed excitement, her low voice quivering in unconscious reverence, for again, in memory, she gripped the railing of the balcony and watched in wonder while her panting heart stood still:

"There came a look in the calm white face of the waiting priest which never before have I seen on the face of man—a look of fearlessness and contempt—and what I saw Dubris saw too, for his sword-point paused as it almost touched the unguarded breast, and then sank slowly to the ground. . . . The father bent and raised the fainting beggar in his arms, turned, stretched forth his hand, and pointed a finger at Dubris. What he said I could not hear, but this I know: the great Dubris—this mighty lord of France—trembling like a frightened cur, turned and slunk into his carriage . . . even as the stricken beggar had crept into the gutter. . . . *Dieu!* . . . *I have seen a man!*"

For a lingering moment silence rested on the

company, then suddenly gave place to a flutter of excitement.

"Wonderful!" cried one.

"Who is he?" asked another.

"I know not. I saw him first to-day."

"But tell us more," urged Violette. "What was the father like?"

Le Corbeau smiled in answer, and her eyes grew soft and glowing:

"Straight as an ash-wood lance—an athlete's form. . . . As handsome as a god . . . and young!"

A woman sighed; the gentlemen, with elevated brows, nudged one another stealthily, but held their peace; Jardin, who, throughout the narrative sat thinking deeply, of a sudden clenched his fist and struck it sharply on the arm of his cushioned chair, then turning, said with his lazy smile:

"Pardon, madame. I know the man.'

"You know him!"

Le Corbeau stepped quickly from her throne, and the company, with eager questionings, surrounded the doctor's chair.

"Who is he? Come, Monsieur—his name—

his history? Tell us," they begged in interest born of human curiosity. The doctor waited until order was restored, and answered carelessly:

"Oh, there is little, after all, which one may know of priests, and smaller profit in the knowledge once acquired. This one, amongst his order, is known as 'Brother Claudien'; but by the poor of Paris he is called 'the Good Samaritan.'"

"And worthy of the title," Le Corbeau murmured musingly. "Well, what more?"

"Little, relatively speaking. I saw him but once, at his cloister on the city's outskirts, where he summoned me to see a patient—an afflicted brother whose zealous precepts had outrun discretion, and who, therefore, took a vow of silence till his broken jaw was healed. I set it."

"A pest upon the patient!" said Le Corbeau pettishly. "What of Brother Claudien?"

"I do not know him further than by sight," the doctor answered lazily, "and merely marked him as a splendid specimen of manhood—in physique, I mean—a soldier gone to waste—a

wrestler hidden in a cassock. However, I have heard of him repeatedly; he belongs to one of the branches of the Order of St. Dominic, and is neither priest nor friar, but a queer *mêlange* of both, his sheep-fold being known as 'The Brotherhood of the House of Peace.' A curious sect, these fellows, who freely shuffle in the worldly pack, yet are bound by the strictest vows of celibacy."

"Ah, I see," said La Rose. "They can never marry."

"No," said Jardin; "it is, I believe, among their most sacred pledges."

"Oh, sages most profound!" Raymond observed with mock solemnity. "I think I will join their order."

"Silence, Raymond!" said Le Corbeau sharply. "Go on, Jardin."

The doctor paused to smile at his friend's irreverence and resumed:

"A corner of their cloister provides a shelter for the sick and homeless, and abroad the toilers practise charity, working daily in the slums of Paris; but as to Brother Claudien, there is little more to tell you—except, indeed, an unim-

portant matter which I learned one day by accident."

"And that?"

"Um—merely the name he bore before his advent into clothes of sacerdotal cut."

"Tell me," Le Corbeau urged in breathless interest.

The doctor paused, then with a slight, peculiar hardening of the lips, said slowly:

"Perhaps I should not disclose so secret a matter. His name is Léon la Valière . . . a fine old stock . . . the son of a courtly gentleman . . . and is said to be a most unusual man." The doctor rose and added lightly: "But then, you know, he comes from a most unusual family. . . . His sister has recently become the Duchesse de la Fère."

"WHAT!"

Le Corbeau faced him, whitening to the lips.

"Is it possible you have not heard?" the doctor asked in half-concealed amusement. "I cry your pardon."

Jardin had led up craftily to his point. He knew the weak spot hidden in Le Corbeau's armor, and had touched her on the raw.

"Monsieur," she said, as she bit her lip, "if this be a jest, it fails most signally in amusing me."

"On the contrary," he disclaimed, "I speak in sober earnest;" then to the company he added smilingly: "Believe me, ladies, it is quite a fascinating story. The Duc de la Fère"—here he turned to Le Corbeau and said with his lazy drawl, "I believe you knew him slightly."

"Why do you taunt me?" she flashed back angrily. "You know he was my lover, and that he left me—for whom I know not, nor care. . . . Well, the rest of your fascinating story!"

She crossed the room and testily flung herself upon the lounge, watching Jardin with a swiftly rising temper; while the doctor, as though unconscious of the fires he lit, addressed the company in the dry, half-serious, half-bantering tone of a *raconteur* who thoroughly enjoys his story:

"The Duc de la Fère, as you doubtless know, was the wildest blade in Paris, with far more vices than this seasoned *coterie* rolled into one black pill. *Ciel!* What an adjunct to the court of Lucifer. For several years, 'tis said, the duc was a sort of marionette for the pleasure of a

friend"—here the doctor waved his hand significantly—"she to pull the string, while the duc danced nimbly to such mad measures as her fertile brain invented for his heels. But suddenly, two months ago, the duc reformed, forswearing women, wine, and song—snapped his patrician fingers beneath the charmer's dainty nose, and then—and then, what think you?"

"What?" asked La Rose.

"Married!" The doctor laughed. "Married a yellow-haired maiden with soulful eyes, who goes to mass three times a week . . . and takes her husband with her!"

Again the doctor laughed, not coarsely, but long and heartily, as though the moral reformation of the duc were a subject for keenest humour. Le Corbeau winced, but remained inactive, while those who watched her marvelled alike at the doctor's rash audacity and the startling absence of a furious outburst from the poppy flower; for her tongue of flame was wont to sweep away all barriers opposed to her passionate, despotic will. And though Le Corbeau's temper boiled hotly against Jardin, still his sudden change of front for the moment stag-

gered her; a man who, heretofore, had been like clay in the moulder's hands, now daring to flout her openly and hold up her wounded pride as a target for Parthian shafts of vulgar jesting. The shafts sank deep; Le Corbeau rose and crossed to where her arch-tormentor stood, rudely brushing La Rose aside in her angry haste.

"Enough of this!" she cried. "You weary me!"

"So said the duc, if I remember right," returned Jardin, with an irritating smile.

She raised her hand to strike him, dropped it to her side, and then, with a shrug, went back to her seat again and fanned herself excitedly. La Rose smoothed out the rumpled lace upon her shoulder, and turning to Jardin said sweetly:

"I pray you go on, Monsieur, with the story of the duc; it is really quite refreshing."

Le Corbeau's dark eyes glittered dangerously as she shot her glance toward La Rose, and a dull flush mounted slowly to her temples. The doctor rubbed his hands and again took up the thread of his interrupted narrative.

"It seems," he said, then paused and took a pinch of snuff, "it seems that this little saint,

Cécile la Valière, has wrought a miracle, for, lo! she has taken France's greatest sinner and well-nigh canonized him. The duc, 'tis whispered, is now a very proper gentleman, and so, my friends, you will readily perceive that Cécile succeeded where even Le Corbeau failed."

"The insolent!" Le Corbeau gasped, while Raymond plucked his neighbor's sleeve and whispered slyly: "I think that Satan is pricking up his ears. I mark the scent of sulphur."

The doctor's nose seemed far less sensitive, for he faced his hostess with an air of deep commiseration: "I fear, madame, that you have a formidable rival in the dainty duchesse; . . . but then, as they say, her beauty drives the nail . . . and her virtue clinches it."

Le Corbeau bit her lip till the toothprints showed upon the flesh, but answered nothing. Jardin went on remorselessly:

"I have never fully understood why you failed to hold the duc. I grant your power over men —some men—but I swear you could never have cut a saint from the cloth of poor La Fère."

"No," she retorted shortly, "and I never tried. It seems that I make demons of saints,

but never saints of any sort. The pattern is out of style, and saints are tedious."

"Y-e-s," he admitted, with a slow, depreciating shrug, "y-e-s—sometimes; and yet . . . with all your alluring witchery, there are men in Paris with whom you would be . . . as a reed in the wind."

She sprang to her feet in resentful fury, goaded at last beyond forbearance by his scoffing tone.

"No!" she cried. "There is not a man in Paris—no, nor in all of France—whom I could not bend to the force of will! A fig for your duc, the dancing marionette who broke his string in weariness! Aye, but he danced my measure," she hissed exultantly, "and would dance it still—as you have footed it, Monsieur—did I beckon with a finger. No, Jardin, I tell you, no! You men are all alike—your boasted honour melts like wax beneath a woman's touch. All—all alike, and where I choose . . . I conquer."

"Ah? And by what means?"

"That is my affair. I conquer!"

"Hmp!" the doctor sniffed and toyed with

his silver snuff-box. "I remain, perforce, a sceptic. There was once a captive fox—so runs the tale—who bragged among his fellows that did he choose he could spring upon the moon. 'Wonderful!' observed a friend. 'I have often marked your rare agility, and have wondered much why you did not leap from the shallow pit which holds you prisoner.' 'Fool!' sneered the fox, 'I never jump for the benefit of doubters.'"

This fable, made to hand, was received by the listening guests with shouts of laughter, and Le Corbeau, stung to unreasoning passion, played easily into the doctor's net.

"Monsieur Jardin," she flashed in withering scorn, "I know not what your object is in taunting me—and care not—but what you dare in ridicule I dare in earnest. Name me a man in France—name whom you will—and if I fail to win him in one full month, I will kneel at the feet of your milk-faced duchesse and acknowledge her my superior."

"Done!" the doctor cried. "I make you a wager. I will name you a man in Paris, and bet five hundred thousand francs that your charms will fail—fail utterly."

"Five hundred thousand francs against what?" she sneered.

He leaned toward her and answered in an undertone: "Yourself . . . as my——"

She cut him short with a scornful laugh, and shuddered.

"Oh, what a fate! . . . But I accept it—*pardi*, even that! I may not reach the moon, Monsieur, but at least I'll leave one scoffer in the pit." She turned her back upon him and faced the company: "Come, fill your glasses, and I'll toast his champion in a pledge to win or lose!"

In a moment wine was poured and the company gathered closely round the central figures. Le Corbeau raised her glass, surveyed Jardin defiantly, and called aloud:

"The champion! Who is he?"

The doctor paused, then answered with his hard, cold smile:

"*Léon la Valière, . . . the Good Samaritan!*"

A gasp of abhorrence burst from the startled listeners as the doctor's scoffing lips profaned the priest; but Le Corbeau stood unmoved, save

that her cheek grew pale, and a trickling stream of wine was spilled from her trembling glass, and dribbled down her white, uplifted arm. She fixed her eyes upon Jardin in a keen, unflinching gaze of loathing and contempt, then slowly, slowly the glass was lowered and flung with a splintering crash at the tempter's feet.

"Monsieur . . . you have your answer. . . . I decline!"

"*Brava!*" applauded Raymond, and a murmur of approval rippled round the circle of spectators. The doctor bowed and softly clapped his hands:

"Well acted, Corbeau—well acted, on my soul!"

"What mean you?"

"A simple compliment to madame's art. Where Le Corbeau fails . . . Le Corbeau's failure is at least dramatic."

"You are pleased to be satirical, Monsieur."

"I humbly deny the charge. My champion is beyond your reach. Aye, even yours, Corbeau. Madame is too intelligent to play a game when she's sure to lose. Madame is mighty, but, alas! her powers are limited."

She answered coldly: "'Tis not a question of my power, but of my will."

"Had madame the power, she would find the will," the doctor retorted sharply; then dropping once more into his slow, derisive drawl, said mockingly: "*Mon Dieu!* how high a fox can jump!"

"Stop!" she commanded angrily. "I've heard enough! *I will not!*"

She turned on her heel to leave the room, and the doctor saw his victim slipping from his grasp. He squared his jaw, and in one last effort to stab her vanity, called after her:

"A moment, madame, I pray you." And as she paused on the threshold of her door, he sipped his wine and addressed the company: "The queen of love has refused my wager. Why? *Parbleu*, 'tis her own affair. . . . But, since she shuns the risk, my offer still stands open to other takers—one of equal wit and charm, and whose feather is not so white. Perhaps La Rose might win . . . where Le Corbeau loses."

"*Jardin!*"

Shrill, sharp, like the cry of a wounded ani-

mal, maddened with rage and agony, his name seemed wrenched from Le Corbeau's white, drawn lips; her splendid eyes blazed vengefully, and her lithe form swayed and crouched as the tiger crouches for his kill.

"*Pouf!*" said Jardin, and turned his back upon her in lazy insolence. "Well, my pretty one," he asked La Rose, in his lagging drawl, "what say you to my wager? Come!"

And La Rose, the shallow butterfly, half in flattered vanity, half in spite toward a rival, shook her giddy head and simpered in reply:

"No, no, Monsieur; your hook is baited with a tempting worm, at which I might snap, and eagerly; but the Good Samaritan is a holy man, and sooner would I lose my tongue than bring harm to him."

Le Corbeau laughed derisively, and in an instant faced La Rose with all the pent-up venom of her soul, turning from the man who had roused her ire to the woman who stung her pride with thin-veiled mockery; and when she spoke, her slow voice, tremulous with scorn, bit like a whip-lash on a naked breast:

"And do you dream that the holy man has

aught to fear from *you?* . . . Could peerless La Rose—with all her countless charms—cause the good priest to forget one single bead upon his rosary?"

La Rose flushed fiery red, then paled again, and asked defiantly:

"Could Madame le Corbeau?"

"I could!" she stormed. "By the splendor of heaven, did I choose, I'd make him trample on his rosary—forget his faith—his cross—his all save me." She wheeled upon Jardin and struck him sharply on the cheek with the back of her jewelled hand. "Monsieur Jardin . . . you have dared to cross your sword with mine . . . and though I hold you in contempt . . . still I am minded to see the end of your coward's game."

"If you can, madame," he retorted coolly.

"I can and——"

"Madame! Madame!" broke in La Rose imploringly. "I beg you not! 'Tis wicked! Wicked!"

"I care not!"

The guests sprang forward eagerly, some pleading with Jardin, while others sought to

soothe the maddened woman's rage. "A pest on you, Monsieur, to anger her!" frowned Violette. Another took Le Corbeau's arm and said entreatingly: "Think, madame, he is a godly man; think, think, I beg you."

"Madame . . . in the name of mercy!" sobbed La Rose.

"I tell you, I care not!" Le Corbeau snarled, and when her friends, with pleading voices, pressed closely round her, she raised her arms and struck out wickedly, fiercely, madly, sweeping them aside.

"Stop!" she shrilled. "What care I for this whining priest—the idol of the poor?" and she laughed hysterically. "The Good Samaritan! . . . Bah! . . . Is he not a man—a man though he wears a cloak and cowl? . . . If I choose to win him—man or monk—I'll win him still!"

La Rose sank down upon her knees with a whimpering cry of terror, but the doctor smiled and tossed his glove at Le Corbeau's feet. She stooped—for an instant paused—then snatching up his gage, she rose to her splendid height and faced him in all the glory of her devilish beauty.

"Monsieur Jardin!" . . . Her voice rang out,

a shrill-tongued tocsin of unholy exultation: "Monsieur Jardin! . . . I warn you . . . I will win! . . . Win with all the world against me . . . win . . . though I set my heel upon his cross and drag him from the altar of his God!"

The guests shrank from her silently, till the hush was broken by a painted woman weeping bitterly.

CHAPTER VI

When Le Corbeau woke next morning, a flood of sunlight streamed through the curtains of her bed, causing her eyes to blink distressfully; but keener still, a flood of memory stung her awakened conscience—harsh, pitiless as the jailer's fist that rouses a slumbering captive by a blow. What madness had she done which seemed so monstrous in the glaring light of day? What demon's prompting stirred her soul to such an unholy test of woman's power? And the priest—*Grand Dieu!* . . . the priest!

Bitterly she cursed her folly in blundering blindly into a trap, but far more bitter still her hot resentment raged against Jardin. He who had roused a sleeping devil in her blood, hoisting her pride with his lever of scoffing ridicule to the tottering height of passionate unreason. And when she fell she would see his haunting smile, a smile that burned like acid in an open wound, and hear him murmur in a lazy, mock-

ing drawl: "Pray, jump again, my pretty fox; the moon swims low to-night, and you only missed it by a thousand leagues. *Encore!*"

Oh, but he should drink the lees of penitence! The fires of hatred flickered in her half-closed eyes, and her white teeth shut with a sharp, vindictive snap. What recked a priest, so long as she struck Jardin—struck him in mid-flight and broke his wings? And yet—ah, better a hundred pangs of deep humility than a cruel stab to the Good Samaritan!

She flung her coverings aside and rose in the impulse of her pitying resolve. She would go to Jardin to-day—at once—appeal to his generosity, and make an end to the terms of his evil wager. Surely he, too, must feel the baseness of his act. He would hail her coming with a lightened conscience and join her in a truce to the petty spites which marred their peace and set their paths with thorns. She would even ask to keep his glove—no longer a gage of open war between them, but a pledge to amity and accordant kindliness.

She summoned her maid and in feverish haste began her toilet, sipped at a cup of chocolate,

and gave orders that her carriage wait in half an hour.

"*Rue St. Honoré!*" she called as she sprang into her seat. "Stop at the door of my physician. Drive quickly, Adolphe; to-day I would go in haste."

The driver cracked his whip, and Le Corbeau, leaning back among her cushions, was whirled through the crowded thoroughfares till they reached the fashionable quarter and the street in which the doctor lived; and as her wheels rasped sharply against the curb, Jardin himself stood bowing at her carriage window, hat in hand.

"*Bon jour, madame!* I am honoured far above my merits. *Ma foi!*" he drawled, "what hope for a sinner's vanity when the mountain seeks Mohammed?"

"Jardin," she said impulsively, "I have come to say——"

She paused and looked him in the eye. No spark of contrition there; but in its place a flickering twinkle of amusement—a ghostly glint of humorous disdain. His face was placid, till the corners of his mouth twitched restively and

curled into a smile—that maddening smile—more eloquent than his keenest gloating taunt—a smile in which she read the answer to her yet unspoken plea; and, further still, she saw that he expected her—knew that she would come—and pitied her for woman's weakness. Pity! Pity! And from Jardin!

A wave of fury surged in her parching throat; she choked it down and moved her lips to speak. No sound came forth save the whistle of her breath, expelled convulsively; and the doctor waited.

"Y-e-s?"

His tone, accompanied by a nameless shrug and a weary elevation of his brows, was the torch that lit the tinder in her soul; and when she answered him, she set each word on the bowstring of contempt and shot to kill:

"You *dog!* . . . I have come to say . . . that I yet will nail your skin to the door-post of The House of Peace! Look, Jardin! . . . Look on my beauty which has run you mad! Think of the scourge you place within my reach . . . and when you writhe beneath its lash—go ask the priest for mercy!"

She called to her driver sharply; the horses plunged away, and the rear wheel grazed the doctor's knee as he leaped aside.

Jardin in silence stared at the swiftly disappearing carriage till it passed from sight, then sought to deceive himself. He took a pinch of snuff and flicked the dust from his finger-tips; but his hand was trembling.

CHAPTER VII

For the Poppy Flower the next two days were busy ones. Her initial step was a morning call on M. Fouchet, secretary to the prefect of police, a weazened little man, who, had she so desired, would have stood upon his head, and cheerfully. From him she received a record of the family La Valière concisely written in a small red book; and this she studied carefully, from the date on which the parents of the priest left France for Italy until the son, for reasons not clearly stated, returned and entered as a novice in The House of Peace. From the mass of detail she picked her points as a leader might choose his men for a daring enterprise, ranging them artfully till her plan of action was slowly moulded into shape.

Two salient flaws remained; one she could leave on the lap of chance, but the other must find a remedy. She knitted her brows and scanned the record line by line, and at length her eye lit joyfully on the vital item for which she sought.

"Adrienne . . ." she murmured softly. "Adrienne du Langois . . ." Then she smiled —smiled grimly, and cast her book aside.

Her one remaining difficulty was swept away by a stroke of unlooked-for fortune. She learned through the gossip of M. Chatillon that the Duc de la Fère had been sent that very day to Rouen on some mission for the king. His absence would cover a space of several months; and owing to his great uncertainty of movement, his wife, the duchesse, would remain in Paris awaiting his return. There! There in the home of her recreant lover she would humble Jardin and flout the duc. *Bon diable!* Fate had made a jest at last, and the Poppy Flower would see that the laugh went round! The duchesse was the sister of the priest, and could Le Corbeau gain an entrance in her house, the rest was easy, "as easy as lying."

Next morning she left her home, and, attired in a modest gown, sought humble lodgings in an unpretentious quarter of the city. Few would have recognized the flaming Poppy Flower in the timid, shrinking girl who sat all day at her dingy window above the shop of the poor *couturière*,

Madame Denise; and yet, could one have watched her eyes as they searched the street in feverish eagerness, his fancy might have conjured up the thought of a crouching panther waiting for its prey.

When the dusk of evening settled down and the passers-by loomed dim and spectre-like amid the gloom, Le Corbeau spied the tall, lithe figure of the priest, as he swung along with a swift and sinuous stride. His cowl, thrown back, revealed his clear-cut features, clean, patrician, yet tempered with a wondrous tenderness, which had gained for him the adoration of the poor of Paris.

The heart of the Poppy Flower churned hotly in her breast and seemed to count the approaching footsteps with its throbs. The priest was now almost beneath her window! A sickening chill gripped tightly at her throat, and she hid like a guilty thing behind her curtains, trembled, and was afraid. In an instant the weakness passed. At a fleeting memory of Jardin she shut her teeth and thrust the blinds apart, then leaning out, called gently down to the Good Samaritan:

"Father."

The tall priest paused, looked upward, and beheld her—a pale Madonna—framed in a dingy window.

"Father," she asked in a faltering tone, "will you not enter? I—I would speak with you."

He bowed and passed into the shop of Madame Denise. Le Corbeau met him at the foot of her narrow stair, and led the way to a shabby little parlor in the rear. She closed the door and faced the priest in deep, unfeigned confusion. For a moment he waited silently, then led her to a seat.

"How, mademoiselle," he asked, with a pleasant smile, "may I hope to serve you?"

Once more that sickening fear gripped tightly at her throat, but passed as she plunged into the current of her story. She told it clearly, but with many halts and pauses, and a timid modesty which furnished colour to the *rôle* she acted. In brief, her parents, although of the French nobility, had lived for many years in Genoa, and upon their death both she and her brother, Louis, remained in Italy beneath the guidance of an uncle. Their income was an ample one,

and all went well until their uncle was drowned at sea; then Louis was wrongfully suspected of plotting against the government, and was forced to fly in secret for his life. He had promised to join her here, in Paris, but her search for him had proved fruitless, although a weary month had passed since first she came. She had made the voyage alone, was friendless, unprotected in this strange, vast city, her purse—she paused, looked up appealingly and dropped her eyes—her purse was growing lighter day by day; her brother might, alas! be dead—and she knew not where to turn. She had seen the priest, she said, in the street beneath her window, and had called to him in the hope that his kind advice might guide her ignorant and bewildered steps.

The priest had listened to her tale with sympathetic interest, urging her gently when she faltered in her speech, lending her aid by words of warm encouragement, and when she had finished, promised such assistance as lay within his power; then he rose to take his leave.

"To-morrow, mademoiselle, with your permission, I will send an agent who can doubtless sift the matter easily; and let us hope that your

brother will soon be found. But you have not told me—may I . . . ask your name?"

"Adrienne," she answered simply. "Adrienne du Langois."

"What!" he exclaimed. "Du Langois! And your father——"

"The Chevalier Bernard."

The priest held out his hands.

"My child," he said, with a cordial warmth, "it was more than a trick of chance that prompted you in speaking as I passed—nay, rather, the hand of ever-watchful Providence, since it grants me the privilege of aiding one who bears your father's name."

Le Corbeau gazed in well-assumed astonishment as the priest continued:

"Your father and mine were the closest friends from boyhood. As a child I remember the Chevalier, a slender gentleman with a pointed beard and a wondrous memory for tales of dwarfs and goblins. Why, you will scarce believe it, mademoiselle, but he gave me my first toy sword." And Claudien laughed. "A mighty brand with which I cut the heads from the flowers in our garden, till my mother slapped

my hands and locked the dangerous weapon in her closet. But there," he added in a tone of self-reproach, "in my thoughtless pleasure I had wellnigh forgotten your distress, which I trust may vanish speedily in my sister's home."

"Your sister!"

"Yes, my sister, the Duchesse de la Fère, who will welcome you as an honoured guest. You will come with me to-night—at once."

"But, father," she expostulated nervously, "how could I—a stranger—ask your sister's hospitality? No, no—impossible! I cannot so impose upon your courtesy. Believe me, sir, I——"

But the priest laughed merrily, and answered every protest with such wise argument as to leave her no alternative. His sister's home, he said, would prove a safe retreat while inquiry was set on foot on behalf of her brother Louis. Again, the house was overrun with servants, waxing fat in idleness, who would tend her every need; and, furthermore, the Duc de la Fère was absent from the city. Thus in coming she would perform a deed of Christian charity by cheering Cécile in her hours of loneliness. Lastly, were he, the priest, in the place of made-

moiselle, he would stalk to the palace of the duc, pound on the door with his two great fists, and demand admittance in the name of the chevalier.

And thus it was settled in the end, that he should first advise the duchesse of her coming and return for mademoiselle at a later hour, when her scanty wardrobe had been arranged and packed. Then he pressed her hand and left her.

An hour or more flew by, and Le Corbeau sat at her dingy window in an agony of indecision. At the memory of the priest, in his tenderness and compassion for her false distress, a wave of shame crept slowly from cheek to neck, till her breast grew hot with the stifling glow of guilt. It was not to be borne! No, not an instant more! She rose from her seat and snatched up her dark grey cloak. She would fly from this hateful place—home! Home! And yet—Jardin!—his merciless smile—his haunting drawl of irony! Home—to gasp like a fluttering bird in the falcon's claws—and still —ah, God! it were better so—better Corbeau than Claudien!

Softly she crept down the creaking stairs to the shop below, where the pinched *couturière* sat nodding over a half-completed gown. She laid a coin in the sleeping woman's palm, and with a backward glance made stealthily toward the door. Too late! A pair of foam-flecked horses clattered down the cobbled street, and the blazoned carriage of the Duc de la Fère was halted beside the curb. The priest sprang out, and ere she could cross the threshold and slip away unseen, he entered and stood before her with a boyish smile of pleasure.

What followed swam like the dim confusion of a dream. The priest was speaking, but his words seemed meaningless. A tall *côcher* in silver livery swung her packing case to the boot of the waiting carriage, and in a moment more she was whirled away, with a fleeting glimpse of Madame Denise, roused suddenly from her nap, and staring stupidly while she idly fingered a golden coin, turning it over and over in her work-worn hand.

They sped across the familiar city, Le Corbeau struggling with the tangled thoughts that ached through her reeling brain, and beside her

chatted the black-cloaked priest, happy, indeed, in his innocent desire to smooth a path for the child of his father's friend.

By some strange, mocking chance they passed Le Corbeau's home. The darkened windows, like sightless eyes, stared vacantly from their cavities of gloom, and a lace-decked noble rapped vainly upon the door with the hilt of his slender rapier.

They rolled down the wide white boulevard skirting the Seine, and slackened speed as they reached the gateway of the palace gardens. Once more Le Corbeau felt that icy tightening about her heart. She was entering the home of the Duc de la Fère—the duc, whose wanton mistress she had been—the duc who had dragged her from a pedestal of purity to the mud of the *demi-monde*. She heard the wheels as they crunched on the gravelled road—a spaniel's rasping bark, and then—a glare of light which wellnigh blinded her. . . . The priest was lifting her shrinking weight from the carriage step . . . and his sister, with a childish cry of welcome, sprang forward and kissed her upon the cheek.

CHAPTER VIII

Le Corbeau had gained her first strategic point, but at a cost which soiled the gloss of conquest with a smear of shame. Her presence in the home of the Duc de la Fère, where the priest might come and go at will, gave her at once a key to the door of treachery, by which she need only enter cautiously and rouse the sleeper from his couch of innocence. And yet at every turn she found herself disarmed by the brother's simple trustfulness and the sister's pure, confiding love. The duchesse, a child in thought and years, saw in the older and more brilliant woman an object for girlish adoration, and opened her warm, impulsive heart to the charm of a new-found idol; the priest, his solemn dignity relaxed by the debt he paid to the memory of the chevalier, found time to come each day in kind solicitude for the feeble health of mademoiselle.

And Le Corbeau, feigning shaken nerves, as a ruse by which to gain immunity from the pry-

ing eyes of visitors and friends, was forced to accept a gentle ministry to false distress, poured out in bounty by the hands of pure unselfishness. At times their kindness caused such conscience-stricken pangs, that a word of harshness would have seemed a welcome note; but, on the other hand, her life so new and strange—a life of purity and peace—brought recompense. How widely different from the world she had always known; *her* world, with its jar and clash, its tinselled mockery, its fierce unrest! To herself she seemed like a parched traveller who finds at last the cool oasis shade, to lie beneath its sheltering palms in rest unspeakable, forget the heat of the tawny desert's breath, to weep with joy beside a life-restoring spring, to drink and drink and sleep . . . then wake to drink again.

And so the days sped by, each bringing in its span some proof of love and thoughtfulness, some sly invention for the comfort of the guest —an outcome of mysterious plotting by the duchesse and the priest, who placed their heads together and whispered long and earnestly, as though the fate of empires swayed between the

concoction of a strengthening soup and the ministration of a sheaf of roses plucked from their morning bath of dew.

Did the day prove warm and clear, Le Corbeau seemed content to wander through the garden which sloped to the river bank, to loll at ease on some shaded seat, or feed the gold-fish from the rim of a tiny fountain, listening the while to the childish prattle of Cécile, as busy and as sweet as the stream which bubbled from the marble basin. Here the priest, perchance, would join them for a pleasant hour snatched from his labours in the city, and when the three sat down together, the time would fly on such deceitful wings that Léon—as Cécile was fain to call him—would rise from his seat in consternation, chiding them laughingly as sly conspirators against his cloth.

He now came oftener than had been his wont; but then there were weighty reasons for his coming. Reports to make on his search for the missing brother Louis, who, thus far, baffled every quest; a moment only, to bring a potent cordial which a brother priest had found effective in cases of failing strength or sluggish blood.

He came, deceived by a hundred tricks which conscience plays on unsuspecting man, twisting his pliant pleasures into artful shapes resembling duty.

And Le Corbeau learned to listen for his footsteps with emotions she herself could scarce define. True, she saw the priest, as yet unconscious of his danger, sink swiftly, surely beneath the glamour of her half-exerted spell. She saw him gaze in wondering lethargy, as a dove might watch a snake, and knew she had only to sway her polished coils with a gentle, undulating swing, to bide her time and strike. But how could she strike where pity cried reproof, where practised skill was met by truth and artless innocence? A something stayed her—a something new and strange; whence or why it came she knew not; but it crept upon her slowly, and she wished to weep.

Two weeks went by, and still Le Corbeau made no signal move, but passed her hours in drowsy indolence. There were moments when she yearned to creep away in the stillness of the night, leaving no trace behind save the memory of her living lie. Again, when her pulses

stirred, a spark of the old Corbeau would fire her blood with the mad, resistless joy of conquering; her every subtle art, each ripe, voluptuous charm, was flashed for a burning instant on the dazzled priest, and then—at a poignant stab of keen remorse—the Poppy Flower would shrink within herself, lest he, lying within her poisoned zone, should inhale the bane exuded from her bloom.

Alas! her swift caprice, her fickle change from ice to fire, from fire to ice again, served but to weld a mightier chain about the neck of him who knelt and struggled not. He felt its weight, but its links were yet invisible.

An evening came, an evening long remembered by the priest, when he supped with his sister and her guest; and afterward they sat for an hour or more in a cosy nook beneath the glow of a crimson-shaded lamp, while the duchesse read aloud from a book of fairy tales and Adrienne was busied with embroidery. How soothing it seemed to Léon thus to recline in an easy-chair and forget his daily toils, the sins and miseries of the squalid streets, to listen to the softly modulated tones of his sister's

childish voice, and watch the red light play on the face of Adrienne as she pored over the pattern of her silken roses.

The fairy tale was ended; the wicked dwarfs were howling grievously; the cruel ogre was dead at last, and the radiant princess had come once more into the kingdom of her heart's desire. Léon turned to Adrienne and smiled—a smile he did not understand. But Adrienne understood, and spoke of other tales, stories of brave adventure and noble sacrifice. She spoke of history and art, of poetry, repeating verse on verse in her low, seductive voice, showing new beauties in the lines he had passed unheeded, and with her sparkling humour brushed away the cobwebs from his dulled imagination. He was like a man, she told him, laughingly, who had looked on fruit his whole life long and had never tasted. She took Cécile's guitar upon her knee and drew from its strings a pleading melody—chords she had touched before, on an oft-remembered night when she stooped for the doctor's glove—a melody of tears and prayers. In fitful mood the sad refrain was changed to the martial notes of a battle hymn, then dropping

once more into a dreamy theme, she sang, with a soft, caressing croon, a weird Italian ballad, which she called "The Castle Sprite." And Léon sat with eyelids closed drinking her music thirstily.

THE CASTLE SPRITE.

A minstrel stood in a castle grim,
'Mid crumbling and moss-grown walls,
Where the lone owl hoots in the twilight dim
And flits through the silent halls.
And idly his fingers touched his lute,
As he mused in the shadows drear,
When the plaintive notes of a silvery flute
Fell witchingly on his ear.
The whispering low of the fountain's flow,
In its soft and tremulous swell,
And the wild, weird sound of the music, bound
His soul in a mystic spell.

The Castle Sprite from an archway danced,
In nimble and noiseless grace;
Her ivory limbs through a gauze robe glanced,
Like the smile on her Circean face.
Her tresses were tangled, and, glistening, fell
O'er a figure of faultless line,
Her voice was as clear as a tinkling bell,
Her eyes were sparkling wine.
The fire-fly's loom, in the shrouding gloom,
Flashed pale on her ravishing charms,
And the pleading Sprite, in the flickering light,
Flung open her snow-white arms.

For a moment wavered the minstrel's gaze
On her passionate, upturned face,
And his wild heart leaped in a love-lit blaze,
As he sank in her soft embrace.
He pressed his lips to her blush-red cheek,
And a laugh of derision sped
Through the echoing halls to the turret's peak.
The youth on the stones . . . lay dead.
When the moon shines cold on the castle old,
And the low wind sobs in the trees,
The notes of the lute and the sighing flute
Are borne on the whispering breeze.

When the song was done and Le Corbeau turned to Léon with a smile, urging that it was now his turn to entertain, he started at her voice and stammered helplessly; then, for lack of a better theme, he told her in artless words of the lives of those who dwelt in The House of Peace. He told of their simple fare and daily toil; of their saint-like abbé, who watched like a shepherd o'er his flock; of harmless sports in the hours of recreating. He told of their hopes and aims in the narrow path which Heaven had pointed out: to spread Christ's message to their fellow-men; to teach where drudging ignorance had dulled the instinctive wish to learn; to flash God's light through the darkened doorways of the humblest hovels; to struggle with and for

the poor of Paris and make their hearts and bodies clean. And last, to keep their own frail souls as spotless as their white and unsoiled cassocks, giving to sin and poverty the toil of their hands and minds—their hearts to God.

"Live ye thus," said their abbé tenderly, "in the shadow of The House of Peace."

The priest had spoken simply, yet a woman listened in dumb despair, and a tear, which was not all evil, glistened and fell like a dewdrop on her silken roses. When he ceased to speak there came a long, unbroken pause; then Léon arose and said good-night.

When Le Corbeau reached her chamber, she sat for many hours at the open window which looked across the sluggish waters of the Seine.

In her heart grew a firm resolve to leave this home of purity—to leave it untainted and as fair as the unsoiled cassocks of those who dwelt in the shadow of The House of Peace. Then she rose in woman's wrath, shook her white fist at the city's twinkling lights, and cursed Jardin—curses that slid from her bitten lips—low, sibilant, and long.

When the palace gates had closed behind the

priest, he fell into a rapid swinging stride which bore him northward on his way toward the cloister. As he strode along the gloomy, ill-lit streets, a something seemed to follow him, a something indefinable and vague, like the shadow of a fleecy cloud that crept across the moon. It stole behind him noiselessly, passed and seemed to bar his way, then vanished, as he paused to soothe a half-clad child that crouched in a darkened doorway sobbing desolately. With a quickened pace he swung through the squalid lanes to the open country beyond the city's line, where the air blew fresh and cool, and the odour of moistened trees refreshed his nostrils with its sweet perfume; but still the shadow followed him, followed until he reached the gate of The House of Peace and was hidden in his cell.

Long, long he sat in an idle reverie, watching a shaft of moonlight that shot across his room. Beyond the silver bar in the shrouding gloom a faint, warm glow, as from a crimson lamp-shade, filled his cell, and from out its filmy haze the Castle Sprite, dim nebulous and weird, swayed to the whispered pleadings of her flute. He

heard the murmuring gurgle of the fountain's song and the ghoulish laugh that stabbed the silence with its lingering peal, to die away in a haunting, echoed whine . . . "Fabien! Fabien! . . . Forgive! . . . Forgive!"

A dark cloud swept across the moon; the candle flared in its guttered stand, and Claudien rose and shivered in his lonely cell. He noted, with dull and half-unheeding eyes, that the nail which held his crucifix upon the wall was loosened. To-morrow he would fasten it securely—to-night he was too weary; and God's disciple cast himself upon his couch and wept —he knew not why.

CHAPTER IX

THE sunlight on a bright, warm afternoon poured through the open windows of a richly appointed room in the palace of the duc—a room in which the duchesse and her guest were wont to pass their hours of idleness and ease. It looked westward across the gardens, catching the warmest sunbeams and the coolest breezes, made sweet and pure as they filtered through the trees and flowered shrubbery.

Here the duchesse sat alone one morning with her needlework, and as her ever-busy fingers stitched she hummed a happy song; but the words were softly uttered lest they should waken Adrienne, who was sleeping in a room adjoining.

A visitor had just departed, the Comtesse d'Opaleau, an inquisitive little woman, who had come expressly to see with her own black eyes the guest who avoided sympathetic interest with exasperating impudence; but the guest was

thoughtlessly asleep, so the comtesse was forced again to content herself with verbal gleanings. Through the duchesse she learned of Adrienne's fruitless search for her brother Louis, of how she was alone and unprotected in that great and sinful city, until Léon found her by the merest chance and brought her to the palace.

"Your brother," the comtesse asked in some surprise, "the priest?"

"Yes," said the duchesse, "my brother, the priest. The story is a sad one, but I hope to make its ending bright indeed. Could we but discover Louis all would soon be well, and Adrienne's health might mend immediately. She's the dearest girl in all the world, and did my husband know how much I loved her"—she laughed amusedly—"I fear he would frown in jealousy."

"Oh, no, madame," the comtesse hastened to assure her. "Were it her brother Louis now —perhaps——"

"I speak of Adrienne," the duchesse answered with a rosy blush, and shifted the talk to firmer ground: "She is very beautiful . . . tall and stately, with hair as black as a raven's wing

. . . great violet eyes that flash . . . strange eyes, and wonderful. But her great distress of mind has quite unnerved her. She does not mend—poor dear—and seems so timid. Paris frightens her. Why, she never goes out except into the garden. She says she is far more happy here at home, and calls me sister; and I love her very dearly, for she's good and pure—so kind to others, striving to hide her own distress beneath a mask of smiles. But she's sad at times, so sad that Léon is anxious for her health . . . and he comes here every day to see how the patient fares."

"Every day? . . . The priest?"

The eyes of the little comtesse grew round in wondering surprise.

"Why, yes," the duchesse answered naïvely. "Pray, why not?"

"Oh, nothing! I was merely thinking of—er—of how kind it is of your brother—the priest."

"Léon is kind to every one," Cécile returned in an earnest tone. "Do you know what the people of Paris call him?—'The Samaritan, the Good Samaritan.' That is because of his great

warm heart, and his hand outstretched to the helpless always. Ah, God keep him!" she murmured reverently. "God keep him!"

The comtesse bowed her head, then rose to go. She held out her small white hand, and smiled:

"I trust, my dear, that your brother's fears for mademoiselle may soon subside. She is very beautiful, you say? Ah, God keep him, madame. *Adieu*."

As the carriage of the comtesse passed the palace gates, the priest was on the point of entering, and bowed in return to her smiling salutation.

"Hmp!" the comtesse sniffed, with a lingering, backward glance, "he himself is not so ill to look upon. Had I *carte blanche*, a tailor's art, and the devil's pepper-box—*ma foi!*—he'd break more hearts in twenty days than he ever mended in all his saintly life. Now I wonder which is more in danger, the patient or the good physician? . . . *Peste!* I'd give a tooth to know!"

The duchesse, when her visitor had gone, again took up her needlework and low-voiced

singing, when a cheery voice outside the room broke in upon her melody:

"Cécile! . . . Little sister!"

"Yes, Léon, I am here," she answered as he raised the portières and entered.

"Alone, little sister?" asked the priest as he took a chair beside her.

"Yes, all alone; but the comtesse was with me for an hour or more. She came to ask after Adrienne."

"Ah? And how fares the patient to-day, Cécile?"

"Much better," replied his sister. "And do you know, I think she's improving every hour."

"Good! But who would not with such a doctor?" He pinched her cheek and smiled. "A fraction young, perhaps—but wise. Well?"

"She seems much happier to-day," Cécile continued, "and spent the morning with me in the garden, asking me question on question about—about—what do you think?"

"I've not the faintest, first idea. When two such reckless little tongues begin to wag——"

The priest raised both his hands and laughed.

"But guess," she urged.

"I was always the poorest stick at guessing. Tell me."

She pointed her finger, paused, and said impressively:

"You!"

"Me?" And again he laughed. "Then I must run away and speedily, for now I'm known at last in my blackest colours."

"You would not laugh," she said reprovingly, "if you had heard the splendid things I said of you, and had seen how she listened, begging me to tell her of your childhood, and of how you became a——"

The priest's demeanour changed in a lightning flash. "Hush, Cécile," he answered gravely. "Do not speak of that! . . . You were saying that Adrienne is in better spirits?"

"Yes, more cheerful than she has been on any day since first she came." The duchesse pointed to the door of Le Corbeau's chamber. "She is sleeping, I think. Shall I tell her you are here?"

Cécile had risen, but the priest caught quickly at her hand.

"No, no, no," he said, "I would not waken her.

The sleep will do her good, poor child." And when his sister was once more seated, he added in a voice of low, caressing tenderness: "Sleep, little one, was sent to us from heaven. . . . The Father looks down in pity on his children. . . . He sees them groping blindly in the darkness—sees them tempted, stumble, and fall. . . . He hears their cries of weakness and despair . . . and when their hearts are so bruised and weary that Heaven itself seems far away . . . God sends them sleep—sleep that brings forgetfulness . . . and peace. . . . No, Cécile, I would not waken her."

She sought his hand with hers and murmured tenderly:

"Ah, brother, small wonder that the people love you . . . small indeed. But tell me," she asked, in an altered tone, "how fares the family you spoke of yesterday—the poor old woman with the broken arm?"

"I have just this moment come from there. She is much improved."

"And the children?"

Léon laughed. "Oh, sister, the revolution that was wrought this day is truly marvellous!"

"Why, what do you mean?"

The priest stretched out his sinewy arm. "Do you see that heavy hand?" Again he shook with merriment. "I—I washed their faces."

"Hush, Léon!" the duchesse cautioned. "Your laughter will waken Adrienne."

"True; I quite forgot myself." He lowered his voice and continued with his story: "Oh, how they squirmed, the dirty ones! I stood them all in line like a melancholy row of much-soiled captives waiting for the heartless executioner. First, I seized that little vandal, Bazin, and scrubbed him mightily, and when he left my hand he looked for all the world like an onion peeled of its outer coat—sleek and shiny—a revelation even to his mother. And then, Eugène, who kicked and screamed, crying 'Father! my ears are coming off!' Next, Pierre, who bore it sturdily, although the grime seemed deeper than the rest and more tenacious. The soapsuds flew and spattered like a foamy waterfall. Faith, Cécile, I never knew how white a brat he was. And last, little Louise, looking at me in round-eyed wonder, as though the appli-

cation of soap and water were a new and doubtful game in which she took part reluctantly."

Once more Léon laughed, and rising, turned himself about and asked: "Are there any soapsuds on my back, Cécile? They seemed to fly on everything."

The duchesse threw her work aside: "Oh, brother," she said, with impulsive tenderness, "how good you are! I wish I might have you near me always."

"And am I not near you, little one?"

"Yes, near," she answered in hesitation, "and yet——"

"And yet?" he questioned smilingly.

"Oh, Léon," she said, "I know I'm foolish—childish—what you will—but—but the robe! . . . It is so solemn, Léon. . . . Sometimes it almost frightens me—and—and you seem so far away."

He made no answer, but sat in silent thought, smoothing the folds of his cassock with unconscious hands, till his sister's voice recalled him from his reverie.

"You are not listening, Léon."

He patted her hand and looked into her eyes.

"Don't you remember," she asked in childish

earnestness, "the dear old days when we were children? It was different then, when we played together in the sunshine, or sat with mother and heard her wonderful tales of fairies and wicked giants. Have you forgotten the great red giant whom you said you would some day fight and kill?" Léon shook his head indulgently. "And the beautiful blue-eyed princess," she asked, "the princess you would rescue and make your wife——"

Léon raised his hand to check her speech, and a look of poignant suffering overspread his pallid features.

"Child, child," he muttered in a husky whisper, "do you not know that I must think no more of such foolish tales? Do you not know that I must remember only the Father's work—to watch the sheep and lay aside the reed . . . forever?"

"Must it be so, truly, Léon? Forget the good fairies and the little princess?"

"I have forgotten," he answered in drooping sadness.

"Even the great red giant?"

"No!" he cried out sharply. "No! The

giant is reality!" He rose and paced the floor in nervous restlessness, forgetful for the moment of his sister's presence, forgetful that his bitter thoughts were uttered half aloud: "Do I not battle with him day by day—grappling with him—struggling with mind and soul—pleading for strength and victory—trusting and despairing?"

The duchesse rose and came toward him. "Brother," she cried, with a frightened quiver in her tone, "what are you saying—you——"

"There, there," he murmured gently, as he led her to a seat, "you would not understand." He sank into his chair and dropped his cheek upon his hand, repeating slowly, "You would not understand."

"Léon," she asked him timidly, "is it then the robe—does it frighten you, too, at times?"

He sadly shook his head: "No, little one; I fear the priest who wears it in unworthiness."

She knit her brows in puzzled thought, and once more stroked his passive hand: "But, Léon," she said, "can you not sometimes forget the priest for me? I honour holy Church and your work of mercy, but you're my brother still

—my brother whom I love so tenderly. Ah, Léon, such a love cannot be wicked, and if you cared for me as—as I care, dear, surely God would not be angry. Do you think so, Léon?"

"No, Cécile," he answered, with a fleeting smile; "if all the world were as good and pure as you, there would be small need for solemn priests and creeds. So, little one," he added, with affected gaiety, "you are wisest, after all, and your dull old brother must learn his lessons in your own good school. Come, tell me what you will."

"I love to see you so," she answered joyously, and clapped her hands. "Then, too, you know, I must manage every one about me. Not one escapes—no, not even you. What would your abbé say could he see me now?" And, with a roguish laugh, she crossed to the lounge on which he sat and nestled close beside him.

Her brother smiled and took her in his arms.

"What would the father say? Truly, that the best and purest hearts in all the world belong ever to the Church."

Léon spoke endearingly, and held her close in a brotherly embrace, while his heart went out

in yearning tenderness to the sister who loved him with a child's idolatry—a love which no man, be he prince or priest, is worse in knowing —a love wherein "the Lord thy God, who is a jealous God," may find no taint of evil. He pressed her head against his shoulder and smoothed her hair, while they chatted merrily of the olden times, when innocence and wonder filled the measure of each day, and the night was robed in a cassock of untroubled sleep.

"Léon," said Cécile at length, "I had the sweetest dream last night. You were in it—and the duc—for I always dream of him."

"Well, little one," he urged, "pray tell me of it."

"I dreamed we lived together in the dearest little house in all the universe. There were pictures and flowers, fountains and cool gardens. There was music, and we danced to its pleasing measures—yes, and you too—for in the dream you were no longer a solemn priest, but our merry Léon, laughing the loudest amongst us all." The duchesse paused and sighed reflectively: "And we seemed so happy, Léon—the duc and I—you and Adrienne——"

The priest rose suddenly. "Cécile!" he cried, in a tone which was almost rough in its pained intensity, "you should not tell me of such things! You should not!" Then seeing in her eyes a look of suffering, he once more took her in his arms and brushed away her tears. "Forgive me, dear," he whispered gently, "I did not mean to wound you, but—but I'm not myself to-day. There—I must leave you now. Later, perhaps, I may return."

"But must you go so soon?" she asked. "Adrienne will be grieved that she did not see you. Listen! Did you hear her call?"

"No," he answered, "I heard nothing."

Cécile crossed softly to the door of the sleeping-room, peeped within, and returned to Léon.

"No," she said, "she is still asleep . . . and Léon . . . she looks so beautiful as she lies with her arm beneath her head. . . . But her covering has fallen to the floor. Wait—I will return immediately."

The duchesse passed into Le Corbeau's chamber, and the door swung slowly inward to a breath of air which blew through the open windows. The eyes of the waiting priest, in idle

apathy, followed Cécile as she crossed the threshold, looked beyond and lingered for a fleeting instant on the form of the sleeping girl, then fell in hot confusion. The warm blood surged from throat to cheek and receded guiltily. He trembled, paused in irresolution, and fled from the room in haste; he raised the portières with a shaking hand, and once more turned his sad gray eyes toward the open door, sighed hopelessly, and was gone.

A moment passed and Cécile returned.

"I feared she might take cold," she said, "and——" Then seeing she was alone, she called in wonder, "Léon! Where are you?"

No answer came; she ran to the open window and saw him cross the garden rapidly. She called, but he either failed to hear or would not heed, and soon was lost to sight among the trees.

"Strange," the duchesse murmured as she left the window. "I do not understand. . . . Why should he leave me thus, so suddenly, without a parting word? I—I do not . . . understand. . . . "

She turned once more to her needlework,

but her thoughts were not with the silken flowers.

"Poor boy," she muttered compassionately, "his mind seems troubled with his ceaseless toil. He said the giant was reality. Did he not battle with him day by day—struggling with mind and soul—praying for strength and victory—trusting and despairing? . . . I wonder what he meant." She shook her girlish head and sighed. "Ah, me! Poor Léon!" Her hands lay idly in her lap, and her work had slipped unheeded to the floor.

Le Corbeau, robed in clinging *négligé*, tripped softly from her room and stood behind Cécile. She covered the dreamer's eye with her white, slim hands, and cried out laughingly:

"You are my prisoner until you yield me up the secrets of your rebel thoughts."

The duchesse caught the hands in hers and smiled. "A willing captive, Adrienne, and the secrets are yours and welcome; but tell me, first, are you better for your nap?"

"Excellent," Le Corbeau answered gayly, "and now the secrets! Ah," she laughed, "but I can guess. I know these new-made wives.

Your thoughts went flying along the dusty road which leads to Rouen, and when they reached that ancient city they hunted through the crooked streets until they pounced upon a certain gentleman, who, no doubt, at this very minute, is longing for his little wife at home, and is wondering what she may be doing."

The duchesse nodded gleefully. "And could he see me here with you would it not make him happy?"

"The Duc de la Fère—see me—here!" Le Corbeau gasped unthinkingly, then in a quizzical aside: "*Dieu!* I doubt it!" But when the duchesse turned her eyes upon her in blank astonishment, she added lightly: "My dear . . . there are certain gentlemen in this strange old world who love their wives so dearly that the extra person ofttimes proves an unwelcome guest—even though it be a woman."

"But not with you, dear Adrienne. Gaston would love you as a cherished friend. He's such a splendid fellow," she continued warmly. "Oh, I wish you knew him!"

"And so do I," the other answered, with a

sphinx-like smile. "There are certain things I should like to ask the duc."

"What, Adrienne?"

Through Le Corbeau's mind grim, aberrant thoughts of her erstwhile lover stirred uneasily, strange, immiscible, like ghosts of humour at a feast of pain. She pursed her lips and answered, with a lagging drawl:

"I should like to ask him—er—er—how he keeps his dainty mustache in curl."

The laughter of the duchesse rang out merrily—so fresh, so innocent of worldly sin, that it brought a sharper pang to the Poppy Flower than might have been given by a crafty stab of veteran cruelty.

"How absurd you are," declared Cécile, as she nestled close beside her friend on the cushioned lounge. "When you took me prisoner, I had no thought of gathering wool in Rouen, but was thinking of my brother; he was with me for a little while, but left in haste."

"And you did not call me, Cécile?"

"He would not have you wakened. . . . He said that God sent sleep to heal our suffering . . . and when our sorrows seemed too great for

the heart to bear, Heaven, in pity, gave forgetfulness and rest. Is not the thought most beautiful?"

"Yes, beautiful," Le Corbeau answered in musing bitterness, "but, alas! not always true. . . . There are moments when sleep brings no forgetfulness. . . . There are nights when the memory of the day lives with us . . . moments when the restless spirit shrinks from the great, black shadow hanging over it—drawing nearer—nearer—till we waken with a cry . . . and remember what we are!"

She had spoken recklessly, as the hopeless gambler juggles with his fate on the crumbling brink of ruin; and had the duchesse owned a heart of less blind and simple trustfulness she must have seen the canker-worm which lay concealed beneath a wilted leaf.

"Adrienne!" she cried in trembling fright. "You speak so strangely. You are not yourself to-day, and—and Léon, too, was strange. I try so hard to understand him, but he says I'm a foolish child, and——"

"How was he strange, Cécile?" Le Corbeau asked, with enforced composure.

"I scarcely know how I may tell you. 'Twas something which almost startled me. He said——"

At this moment a liveried servant entered, bowed, and waited in solemn deference. The duchesse looked up inquiringly:

"Well, Gautier?"

The servant advanced a step toward Le Corbeau and once more bowed:

"I beg to say to Mademoiselle du Langois that *monsieur le docteur* waits below."

"The doctor!" she exclaimed in blank amaze. "What doctor? Cécile, did you request a physician's visit?"

"I? No."

"There are two of them," Gautier announced, with apologetic dignity.

"Two of them!" Le Corbeau gasped. "*Mon Dieu*, Gautier! Did they bring the coffin and the burial inspector?"

"No, mademoiselle," the servant replied, with smileless gravity; "the gentlemen are quite alone, and came on foot."

The duchesse laughed in spite of herself. "But surely, Gautier," she said, "they gave a name."

"Certainly, madame. . . . Dr. Jardin."

Le Corbeau started, and a wave of colour swept hotly across her cheek, but recovered quickly as the duchesse turned to her, suggesting that Léon, in his thoughtfulness, had sent the great physician.

"Um—no," Le Corbeau slowly said, with grim conviction in her tone. "I do not think . . . that the priest . . . has sent the doctor. Ah! I remember now," she added suddenly, "he's a friend of my brother. Louis wrote to him before we came from Italy. It must be he! Gautier, you may say to the gentlemen that I will see them here. Perhaps, Cécile, the doctor has news of Louis."

"Oh, I hope he has," the duchesse cried in radiant joy. "How happy it would make us all! Do you wish to speak with him alone?"

"If you do not mind, Cécile," said Le Corbeau easily, "perhaps it might be best." She turned to the servant. "You may show them in, Gautier; I shall not keep them waiting over long."

She passed into her room; the duchesse tripped away, singing the happiest of songs,

while the grim Gautier, in solemn majesty, stalked slowly out with the air of a blooded sultan misplaced by mocking chance on the doorstep of his rightful heritage.

CHAPTER X

GAUTIER, with grand *pomposo*, swept aside the portières, and bowed as Raymond and the doctor stepped into the room.

"Messieurs," he said, with a stately roll, "Mademoiselle du Langois craves your kind indulgence till her toilet is complete." Then, with another formal inclination, he noiselessly withdrew.

Raymond dropped into a chair and gazed about the room in critical approval. "Quite artistic, is it not, Jardin?"

"Yes," replied the doctor, with a nod, "the duc is a man of taste—a connoisseur in art . . . and women. But Raymond——"

"Well?"

"To change the subject. Do you seriously believe that Le Corbeau will resent our coming?"

"Undoubtedly," asserted Raymond. "She will look upon this visit as a gross intrusion, and

only wit and pure audacity will save a scene. When a man goes out to light a *pétard*, it is always well that he knows the fuse's length, and yours, Jardin, is short. Be careful, man. You hold one winning card. Reserve it for emergency."

"I know," returned Jardin dejectedly, "but I've lost my skill at play, and my owlish wit is stultified by the simple, blundering truth. . . . God, man! I love her! I've grown dependent on the very air she breathes, and I'd rather far endure her deepest scorn than the starving loneliness of life without her."

The doctor lapsed into brooding silence, and waited in impatience for Le Corbeau to appear. These last three weeks had been a living torture to the man—restless, nervous, his evenings spent in aimless wanderings; bereft of purpose, save that his footsteps led unfailingly to the door of the Poppy Flower—to hear the dreaded answer of the maid, who answered his knock and always shook her head:

"Madame has not returned, *Monsieur le Docteur*. No one is here!"

Once he had spoken rudely to the girl, pushed

past her and explored the upper rooms in the hope that she had lied; but the chambers were all in order, and the wide salon loomed vast and dismal in the light of his lifted taper; and the silence, too, which seemed to creep from each familiar nook chilled his blood with a lingering, nameless fear. He fled in feverish haste, delaying only to slip a placating coin in the hand of the waiting-maid, who held the door and watched his departing figure with a muttered malediction—while she pocketed his gift.

Jardin had been aware of Le Corbeau's movements from the first, learning through a patient's over-busy tongue that a certain Mlle. du Langois was a guest of the Duchesse de la Fère; and by an easy guess and a few shrewd questions made doubt a certainty. He longed to follow even to her citadel, but dared not, till a chance discovery, by Raymond, gave pretext for the step. Thus, armed with a winning card, he had entered boldly, leaving to fortune and a woman's mood the fate he dreaded more than a hangman's noose.

At the sound of Le Corbeau's footsteps Raymond and the doctor rose. She was pale with

thin-masked anger, but bore herself with easy dignity.

"To what, messieurs," she asked, with a shade of irony, "am I indebted for the honour of your unexpected visit?"

"Necessity," replied Jardin, "necessity which drives Mohammed to the mount at last. Your friends, you see, have missed you more, perchance, than you have missed your friends. But seriously, it seems a hundred years since last I saw you."

"Can three short weeks be stretched into a century?"

The doctor leaned toward her and whispered earnestly, "To one who loves as I love . . . yes."

"Stop!" she said. "I do not care to listen. It is most unkind of you to interfere with me. Your presence here is undesired—unasked——"

"You speak plainly," the doctor smiled, "if without mercy."

"I speak the truth!"

"But Corbeau—" said Raymond in remonstrance.

She cut him short with a sharp correction. "Mademoiselle, if you please, monsieur!"

"Pardon me," he begged, "I understand; but indeed Jardin is not to blame in coming, for I persuaded him. Apart from our natural desire to see your charming self, we had some curiosity to know how the cards were turning in—in—shall I say . . . the game?"

Le Corbeau caught her breath and answered in caustic dignity:

"Messieurs . . . understand me! . . . What you are pleased to call the game is my own affair. I undertook it, not because I wished or willed, but because I was forced against my will —by you, Jardin!" She faced him angrily. "I did it when stung by your biting ridicule—goaded by insults to a weak and senseless folly!"

"And so you repent the undertaking?" the doctor questioned smilingly.

She answered icily: "What I undertake I carry through, and this I wish to carry through alone." She inclined her head with stilted courtesy. "Messieurs . . . I wish you both good-day."

"Emergency!" whispered Raymond in the doctor's ear. "Play your card and quickly."

"Mademoiselle," began Jardin, "my visit has another object——"

"I dare say," she interrupted, "but I do not care to hear it."

Raymond thought to stay the coming storm, but spoke incautiously. "My dear Corbeau——"

She turned upon him fiercely. "*Mon Dieu!* Will you always use that name? Did I not tell you? I do not wish to hear the sequel of your rude intrusion. Only go! Go! Go!"

"But only a word," he persisted pleadingly. "Believe me, you'll not regret the moment spent in listening."

"Well . . . what is it?"

"I came," Jardin began once more, "at the risk of your displeasure to prove my friendliness, not to mar your plans."

"I think," Le Corbeau said ungraciously, while she tapped the floor with a nervous foot, "I think you said that once before. In the devil's name, be done with this absurdity!"

"But have you thought," the doctor asked, "of the hourly risk you run in——"

"*Sapristi!* Do you dream that this is news to me? Am I a child?"

"Pray let him explain," urged Raymond seriously. "The cause is graver than your thoughts suppose."

"Then be quick," she retorted in petulance, "for my patience is exhausted!"

"The king," said Jardin, with slow impressiveness, "has recalled the Duc de la Fère from Rouen." Le Corbeau started violently. "His wife knows nothing of it; and I merely thought that should your quondam lover drop in—er—unexpectedly, and find—shall we say—a dear old friend—perhaps——"

The doctor raised his palms and shrugged expressively in lieu of unspoken possibilities. Le Corbeau studied him in silence for a moment, and then stretched out her hand impulsively.

"I understand," she said. "It is generous of you to put me on my guard, and I misjudged you. Pray forgive me."

"Good!" cried Raymond. "We are friends again. "Yes," he added, "the duc returns at noon to-morrow. He will go, of course, directly to the king, but by night at least——"

Le Corbeau interrupted with a gesture, and when she spoke a note of sadness touched her halting tone:

"By night—at least—he will be here—at home."

"And therefore, mademoiselle," advised Jardin, "it were well that you leave to-day—at once." He smiled sardonically. "The duc, I've heard, is a man of action, and your exit might be marked by less dignity than a proud Du Langois relishes. *Bien?*"

She paid no heed to his tone of irony, but said in drooping weariness: "And yet—I've half a mind to stay . . . and let him find me here."

"And then?"

"And then," she repeated bitterly, "and then his servants will thrust me out into the street . . . as I deserve."

"Oh ho!" the doctor laughed. "I see! The cross of good St. Anthony proves a mite too stanch." She rested her eyes upon him, paused, and answered slowly:

"His cross is strong, but on his rosary . . . he tells one bead—for me."

"Hmp! A single bead! Then I fear you have played your little game and lost."

"No! . . . but my heart is sick of it. Sick of the hateful sham—the base pretense to what I am not, and can never be."

"*Bon Dieu!* A conscience!"

"Listen, gentlemen," she said in a hard and cheerless voice, wherein spoke more than simple penitence. "I crept into this house a hypocrite—a liar—posing as the daughter of their father's friend—winning their confidence by a shameless fraud. They give me shelter—food—they minister to my wants and comforts. The duchesse calls me sister—oh, the mockery! I am petted, spoiled, consoled for pretended sorrows. They give me a sinner's glimpse of a home of purity, different—so different from my own."

"Ideal," drawled Jardin. "A life of serene placidity. How does the violent change agree with you?"

"Jardin, be still!" commanded Raymond tartly, and turned to the woman with a sympathetic question: "And the little duchesse—you have grown to like her?"

"Cécile? Oh, yes, even though her very presence brings reproof. She is good and pure . . . and innocent." Le Corbeau smiled. "Really at times it is quite amusing. Think, Raymond, she is teaching me needlework. Needlework! Me!"

"And what," Jardin asked brutally, "does madame teach the duchesse?"

"Nothing!" she retorted coldly. "I am a pupil." Then angrily: "Jardin! . . . will you never learn that a woman—even though she is of the world—is not without some pity . . . or a heart? I have taught her nothing."

"Ah?"

"Why are you so bitterly unkind? In the last two months you have changed indeed."

"I, too, have been a pupil."

"Of mine," she nodded sadly. "I appreciate your thrust—the sharper because of truth. But come, we will not quarrel now; I have no heart to quarrel."

Raymond, at a signal from Jardin, passed out upon a portico which overlooked the palace gardens, and the doctor, left in possession of the field, turned and spoke repentantly:

"Forgive my discourtesy. I am not myself to-day, and there's more beneath a cloak than shows on its outer side. I have one other word to say. You will listen?"

Again Le Corbeau nodded wearily and sank upon the lounge. "Go on," she murmured, "I am listening."

He stood before her like a supplicant, his white hands clenched in nervous earnestness.

"Corbeau," he whispered hoarsely, "you've never known how deeply I have loved you. At heart I am not evil, but there are moments when I seem to lose control and madness chokes my better self to silence. I have a wife —patient—proud—but I do not love her. . . . I cannot! . . . No! It is you! You! I think of you always—I dream you are mine, and wake to the aching hell of unpossession. . . . I've been like a beast confined in a steel-barred cage—prowling, prowling, till his muzzle bleeds—in a hopeless hunt for liberty. Oh, Corbeau, forget my baseness—give up this hateful thing—come back with me . . . to the old life once again."

She looked up sadly. "The old life? Ah, Jardin, the old life is paler than it used to be."

"Then leave it all—forever. In England with me——"

She raised her hand to check his ardour. "Don't ask me this," she begged; "it only pains us both. I cannot."

"You, too, have changed," the doctor faltered. "The priest—is he the cause?"

"Changed? The priest?" she repeated, half unconsciously. "Perhaps . . . I do not know. . . . Go now, Jardin, and forget Corbeau. It were better for us both."

He took her outstretched hand and held it in a lingering grasp.

"Don't send me away like this," he pleaded. "It is far more cruel than you know. If you kill my hope, you leave me a prey to all the ugly devils of jealousy and madness—the evil thing of your own creation. Come back, Corbeau. I only ask the love you gave me once—the love you thought you gave me—a crumb—a grain——"

She rose and turned away her eyes. "No. . . No, Jardin. . . . I cannot."

The fevered blood raced swiftly from his cheek; he watched her for a moment silently,

his eyes like slits in his hard, grey face; then he turned on his heel and laughed.

"Jardin!" Le Corbeau called. He turned and came slowly back. "Jardin, I wish to thank you once again for your warning of the duc's return. It was more than generous."

The doctor bowed and replied with his old *sang-froid:*

"The simple courtesy of calling check to queen in our game of chess, madame. But the move is yours. What will you do since you lose your castle?"

"What shall I do?" she iterated nervously. "I—I must think—I——" She held out her hands impulsively. "Oh, my friend, release me from the wager. I can't go on! I can't! I can't!"

"It rests with you."

"With me?"

"Acknowledge your defeat—and then——"

"What do you mean?" she asked in rising fear.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders indolently:

"We make a bet . . . we lose . . . we pay."

"But the forfeit!" she cried in terror. "You would not claim—you would not claim . . . *me!*"

He looked upon her with a slow, triumphant smile and answered cruelly:

"I would have paid five hundred thousand francs . . . had you nailed my skin to the door-post of The House of Peace."

"But surely," she urged, "you are not in earnest. You would not take advantage of a woman's angry folly. I was mad—insane—I knew not what I did. Oh, Jardin, I—I admit defeat—failure—anything—but release me, Jardin; I ask you as a man—a gentleman—have pity on me."

"You have lavished none on me."

"But think, Jardin," she urged in desperation, "I could conquer if I would. The priest is weak. . . . I can bend him to my will. Ah, I've seen his eyelids droop, the paling cheek, the restless hand, and the voice that halts and trembles. . . . I could win him if I would."

"Then win him!" snarled Jardin through his straight, thin lips.

"No! No!" she cried out piteously. "The

priest is noble—just—he trusts me; he believes me; the humble servant of Heaven, and you ask me to drag him down. His kindness falls upon me like a knotted scourge; his gentleness . . . a blow upon the mouth. This he gives me in payment for a lie, and I long to die of shame. No! No!" she moaned. "By the God he loves, I will not!" And she sank upon the lounge in an agony of weeping. "I'm beaten—broken—take me if you will . . . but pity me!"

The doctor looked in silence, scarce crediting the proof of sight and sound. Once, twice he moved his lips ere speech would flow.

"And you will come"—he asked, an eager tremour in his tone—"to me?"

She nodded miserably and hid her face between her hands. Jardin drew nearer, bending his exultant eyes on the wilted Poppy Flower; and in the love which mastered him he grasped her wrists and drew her hands apart, then kissed her passionately upon the mouth.

With a hunted cry she wrenched herself away, leaped from the lounge and faced him, her harsh voice choked with panting fury:

"*Fool! . . . Fool!*"

He took a backward step, awed by the flaming madness in her eyes, and the hot, lavatic rage which bubbled to her sullied lips.

"Could you not respect a woman's grief for the degradation you have forced upon her? Fool! . . . I would have paid your forfeit had I died of shame. But now . . . I will not!" She snapped her finger in his face. "That, for your unholy wager! That, for an oath to you—you, the dust beneath his feet!"

"Take care!"

"The dust, I say! The dust! Better a million perjuries than the brutish love you offer, or a single stain on the robe of the Good Samaritan. Now, go! I've done with the sin . . . and you!"

"Not yet," the doctor drawled, but his old-time *savoir faire* was edged with cold ferocity. "Not yet, for your forfeit shall be paid with usury."

Here Raymond, who had watched them from the portico, entered unobserved. He took a step toward Jardin and paused in irresolution, while the doctor, swept by a storm of bitterness, went on remorselessly:

"You have measured your strength with mine and failed—failed as I knew you would, when virtue strips the cloth from your ulcered vanity, and you hide your sores with a fetid rag of newborn conscience."

"Jardin!"

"*Huh!* Go tell your priest you have found a conscience . . . and tell him where you found it. He will scorn you as he scorned that silken toad, the Marquis Dubris. The marquis, too, has found a conscience. *Nom de Dieu!* what a saintly pair!"

Raymond clenched his teeth, stepped swiftly to the doctor's side, and took his arm. "Jardin, my friend," he said, "this is unworthy of you. In the name of pity come away."

The doctor brushed his hand aside and laughed derisively. "Saint Corbeau!"

Once more Raymond sought to pacificate his friend, speaking in manliness, but in mild reproach: "You are not yourself, Jardin, to use her so discourteously. Come, no more, I beg you."

"And Saint Dubris!" the doctor laughed in acid irony.

Le Corbeau's mute despair touched Raymond to the quick.

"Enough!" he cried out angrily. "You have gone too far. No man of honour would force a woman further."

The doctor wheeled upon him with a snarl. "Monsieur, I have the honour to address madame —not you! Oblige me and hold your tongue!"

Raymond flushed and retorted hotly: "I was silent till my sense of shame rebelled and manhood sickened at your devil's cruelty. You drove her to the sin with your sneering scorn, and when she asks for pity you taunt her misery. She needs a friend, and before God she may call on two—the one you have lost to-day . . . and this!" And he slapped the hilt of his slender rapier.

"Raymond!—no, no, no, no!" Le Corbeau cried in terror.

Jardin surveyed the challenger from top to toe in slow disdain, then turning to Corbeau, said mockingly:

"My most profound congratulations on your two bold champions—the musician and his bodkin."

Le Corbeau stretched her hand appealingly to Raymond, but he paid no heed; he plucked the doctor's sleeve and said in measured calmness:

"*Pardi*, monsieur, her champions are worthy of a just contempt; and yet—if I remember right—no one has said that Raymond Delese is a blackguard and a coward. I trust, monsieur, that you understand the musician and his bodkin."

"Perfectly." The doctor bowed with mock obsequiousness. "We'll discuss that subject later."

"We'll discuss it now!"

Le Corbeau stepped between them. "No," she said. "The quarrel is mine. I'll keep it mine." She turned to Jardin with enforced composure. "To-day I leave this home of purity to enter mine. Come to me there, Monsieur Jardin, and claim your Jew's requital—blood and bone. I shall not ask for pity a second time."

The doctor bowed. "I shall do myself the honour of an early visit." To Raymond he said, with a curling sneer: "Monsieur Delese may expect me also. Madame . . . *adieu*."

He crossed the room and held the portières apart. Once more he bowed—a bow as taunting as his lazy drawl. Then he dropped the velvet curtains, and was gone.

Le Corbeau watched in silence till he disappeared, then she sank upon the lounge and sobbed: "Oh, Raymond, Raymond, I fear that man—I fear him! He is stronger than I—he——"

"He shall not trouble you again," said Raymond gently.

She raised herself and grasped his arm in trembling dread.

"Raymond," she cried, "you must not fight him—you must not! His deadly sword—you would throw your life away! You must not!"

"At worst," her champion smiled, "'tis over quickly, and better men have passed in a poorer cause."

"No, no, no," she urged imploringly, and clung to his hand, caressing it in woman's fear. "I beg you, Raymond, for my sake, do not add this sorrow to my sins."

"There, there," he answered reassuringly,

"I promise that my sword shall leave its sheath only when forced by the gravest circumstance. Now think of it no more. I will send a carriage after dusk this evening. Come home to-day, and count upon me always."

"Oh, Raymond," she answered tearfully, "you are good to me—too good. But help me—for I need a friend indeed."

"Yes, Corbeau . . . till you need my help no more. . . . Shall I leave you now?"

"Please. I must rest . . . and think."

"And the wager," he asked, "you will give it up?"

She nodded sadly and answered in a faltering whisper:

"Yes . . . with one last lie to cover my retreat, and then—home—to what?"

She bowed her head between her arms, and Raymond placed a gentle hand upon her shoulder:

"Cheer up, my friend. Your failure is a triumph where success would mean dishonour, and we need not blush to own defeat like this."

He stooped and kissed her hair as a brother might and softly went away, leaving her bowed

beneath an unborn grief which her aching heart sought vainly to conceive.

She raised her head and murmured bitterly: "Beaten! . . . Beaten! . . . but not by him—not by his sneers and ridicule—but by a priestly robe. Poor Léon! . . . how easy to win him if I would . . . but oh, the pity of it! No! . . . No! . . . I must say good-bye as gently as I can—and forget . . . forget . . . "

She rose and staggered aross the room, paused and shuddered.

"Jardin! . . . And yet—he is so unhappy. . . . The fault is mine . . . mine only. . . . I made him what he is. . . . He said I was changed . . . and the priest . . . the priest—I—I know not what he means. Ah, Corbeau! Poor Corbeau!"

She swayed and passed into her chamber, from whence her stifled sobs stole fitfully.

CHAPTER XI

In a little while Cécile stole softly to Adrienne's room, but thinking her asleep she sought her own apartment for a cosy nap. An hour went by and Léon once more came.

"Cécile!" he called, and pushed the portières aside. "Cécile! . . ." He paused and listened. "She, too, is sleeping," he muttered half aloud, entered and sat down upon the cushioned lounge. At his feet lay a painted fan which Le Corbeau in forgetfulness had dropped. He took it in his hands, his thoughts with her who had used it last, then laid it gently down beside him.

"I wonder if Adrienne is still asleep," he sighed; he arose and listened eagerly, shook his head, and sank into his seat again. What mattered it to him? He forced his thoughts to his sister and the duc, but his eyes turned slowly till they rested on the chamber door, and his hand stole out insentiently and gripped her fan. A frail stick snapped beneath the pressure of

his palm; he started guiltily and dropped the painted thing, leaned forward, with his burning cheeks upon his hand, and pondered.

The chamber door swung open and Le Corbeau stood upon its threshold. She crossed the room with a noiseless step and paused behind the abstracted priest, for a moment looked sadly down, half turned away, then touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Father."

He rose confusedly and faltered: "Your pardon, mademoiselle, I did not know—I——"

"I see," she smiled. "Pondering over some deep problem of your ritual; planning more work for your tired hands, more steps for your weary feet."

"But I am not weary," he protested, "and was planning, no new labours. Tell me—you are better to-day?"

"Yes, much better, or rather I was," she stammered; "but a while ago I had such a pain —just here," and she laid her hand upon her heart. "It was so severe. . . . It has quite unnerved me."

"My poor, poor child!" he murmured sympa-

thetically, "I am most distressed to hear of it. Is it more easy now?"

"Yes . . . it has gone, . . . but it left me a little weak. I was resting when you came, but I heard you call Cécile and—and——"

"And I disturbed you," the priest exclaimed in self-reproach. "How thoughtless of me to raise my voice!"

"No, no, no," she hastened to explain; "I was quite awake, and am glad you came. Your presence helps dispel my loneliness."

"But you are ill," he argued. "Will you not lie here upon the lounge and rest?"

"You—you would not object?" she hesitated timidly.

"Why should I?"

"See," she said, "I am still unsteady."

She held out a trembling hand, and Léon took it in his own, leading her gently toward the lounge. He placed and arranged a cushion beneath her head, and spread a filmy covering across her slippered feet.

"There," he said, as he tucked in a wayward fold, "as snug as the cloister sparrows."

"Father," she murmured, while she thanked

him with her eyes, "you are so gentle—so tender; but, indeed, you are spoiling me, and I soon shall become a tyrant."

Léon laughed. "A dreadful tyrant, who will rule her subjects with a rod of iron, till they quake and tremble at her lightest word."

"A feeble queen with a single subject," she returned, with a radiant smile, "but he at least shall give obedience. Come sit beside me. . . . The queen must be amused."

"I fear," he said, as he drew a chair to the foot of the couch, "that I will make but a sorry courtier, for my clumsy tongue will halt and stumble over every compliment and leave me sprawling in the mire of dull confusion."

She replied in seeming earnestness: "One truth in home-spun is worth a thousand lies in lace and velvet." She paused, then added with a troubled frown, "I received a piece of news to-day."

"Good news?"

"Yes, good," she answered in hesitation, "and yet—like nearly all good news—it brings a sorrow with it. My brother Louis has arrived in Paris."

"Louis?" the priest exclaimed delightedly. "He is here?"

"No; I have not seen him yet, but his friend, Monsieur Jardin—a physician, I believe—was here this afternoon, and brought the tidings. I know little as yet beyond the fact that my brother is alive and well."

"I am more than glad," said Léon heartily, "to hear such good report, and doubly so because your mind may now be set at rest."

"I, too, am glad," she faltered, "but then——"

The priest looked up, a question in his eyes, and Adrienne answered musingly: "I've been so happy here. . . . It is peaceful . . . a home —pure and——"

The colour fled from Léon's cheek. "And must you go?" he asked. "No, no, your brother, too, will come to us. You cannot think of leaving, mademoiselle?"

"But, father," she demurred, "you forget we are uninvited guests of the Duc de la Fère, who does not even know us."

"But the duc," he argued, "would welcome you. As the children of our father's friend,

'twould be at once his pleasure and his privilege."

She turned her head away and spoke confusedly: "Yes, yes, I know, but—I—I can't explain it, father—even to you. For weighty reasons Louis wishes to remain unknown—for a time at least—and besides, I cannot always be a burden to my friends—even——"

"You a burden? How can you dream of it?"

She passed his remark and went on sadly: "I shall miss your sister, and will long for the quiet days and the peaceful evenings." Her voice came brokenly and sank into a tearful whisper: "I shall miss you also, father. Will you think sometimes of me—the poor, friendless girl who owes so much—so much to you?"

He answered simply, but his tone was heavy with a sense of loss: "I shall miss you . . . mademoiselle."

She turned her glorious eyes upon him pleadingly: "Don't call me mademoiselle; it seems cold and distant." Her red lips curved into a smile. "Is not Adrienne a pretty name?"

"Adrienne . . ." he repeated slowly, and

lingered caressingly upon its sound. "Adrienne . . ."

The tremour in his wistful tone, like a warning note, struck chill to Le Corbeau's heart. She cast her coverlet aside and rose with the stern resolve that through no further fault of hers should the priest be led by evil or deceit.

"Father," she said as she held out her hand to him, "we will speak no more of vain regrets. Come, I will say good-bye. I must pack my few belongings—and——"

"And cheat me of my last half-hour?" he asked in mild reproach.

"No, no," she answered nervously, "not that—but——"

"Has your courtier grown so dull that the queen must fly from him in five short minutes?"

"No . . . no."

"Shall I change my home-spun for a suit of lace and velvet?"

"No, father, no; yet a parting ever proves less sad when quickly made."

She offered her hand once more. He rose and took it in both his own.

"And will you not rest for a little while?"

She felt his pulses stir, and sought to withdraw her hand, but he held it fast. "Think," he pleaded, "'tis the first indulgence I have asked, and perhaps—since you go to-day—it may be, Adrienne . . . the last."

She hesitated still, knowing that his danger crouched unseen behind its fragile barrier of good intent; and she would have left him, even though it seemed ungenerous, but he held her fingers jealously and led her back to her place upon the lounge. With a sigh she sank among the cushions, and a silence fell between them.

Then Léon spoke, with an ill-disguised attempt at cheeriness:

"No more of gloomy subjects! Tell me, how have you and the little sister passed your morning?"

Le Corbeau smiled. "Two lazy needles and two busy tongues. She was telling me of your childhood's days. It is hard for me," she laughed, "to imagine you a boy, running through the fields and robbing birds' nests, or fighting with the other little vandals."

Léon nodded. "Yes," he said, "it seems such

a weary while ago, and yet—I must have done these things like other boys."

"And you never thought in those merry days that you might some day be a priest—a Good Samaritan?"

He sadly shook his head. "And sometimes still I can hardly believe it true."

"To me," she murmured gently, "it also seems unreal. Do you know how I have pictured you?"

"No. But tell me."

"I love my day-dreams, and often I sit idly thinking . . . of cold reality and the things which might have been. 'Tis then that I see you . . . first, as the noble man of God, bending in pity where others turn away—giving a cup of water to the thirsty, lifting the fallen ones, or hushing the sobs of some lonely child whose mother's voice is still . . . forever. For you are tender, Léon—as tender as a woman . . ."

She paused, and in that fleet-winged interval the febrile spark of conquest leaped into living flame—devoured her pity—burnt her fine resolves to blackened dust.

"And then," she crooned, "when through my

tears I look again . . . the priestly robe has faded from you—the sadness of your eye has gone . . . " She raised herself, and her voice rang shrill and quivering: "I see a soldier charging through the flame and smoke of battle. . . . I hear his shout of victory in the din of rushing squadrons—the thunder of the guns —the cries of men and the crash of steel! . . . Ah, Léon, do you think I do not know that an arm like yours was made to wield a sword? Muscles of iron—a heart that hammers at your breast——"

The priest flung out his hands and rose excitedly, paced to and fro, and answered with a husky cry:

"Enough! Enough! Have I not dreamed of it! Have I not longed for it, as the war-horse stamps and quivers at the trumpet's sound? To hold a sword again! To feel the wild thrill of danger, while the mad blood races through my veins! My arm is strong! My sinews throb and strain——"

He stripped the sleeve from his corded arm and raised it in its might, paused suddenly, and let it fall, as a leaf may fall when touched by the

winter's blight. And the woman, watching, asked wonderingly:

"Is it, then, not true that strength and courage were given us to win our battles—to crown our heads with glory?"

"Ah, Adrienne," he muttered in despair, "upon the mighty shoulders of the Christ . . . was borne a cross." He sank into his seat and bowed his head upon his hands. "How frail we are. How soon the heart forgets—forgets the Master's work and turns to vanity. And I—poor human fool— Ah, Adrienne, a priestly robe proves not a shield from mortal selfishness."

A moment passed in silence, then Le Corbeau spoke compassionately:

"I think I understand, good friend. I, too, have struggled and have almost lost. Léon . . . if I asked you something, would it anger you?"

He shook his head. She caught her breath with a quick, sharp inhalation:

"Tell me why you became a priest."

His lips grew ashen. His chair was overturned as he rose suddenly in perturbation.

"Adrienne!" he cried. "You know not what you ask! I've striven to hide it—even

from myself! I must forget! I must! I must!" And he crossed and stood before the open window to hide from her the pangs of his deep emotion.

"Father! Father!" she called, as she followed him. "Forgive me—I have wounded you. Forgive me."

He turned dejectedly. "There," he murmured, "it matters not. 'Twas only for the moment that it pained me, Adrienne."

She answered tearfully: "It was far from my mind to cause you suffering, and my motive was all unselfish. I know your story is hidden from the world, but I dared to hope that with *me* . . . it might have been a help to speak of it."

"And why should I not?" he muttered, passionately. "It lives with me day and night. I've hidden it, as you say, and yet, sometimes, I feel that if I could only tell it—tell it to some one——"

"Tell me, Léon. I shall guard it as a sacred trust."

He suffered her to lead him back, as a woman leads a child, and when she once more lay upon the lounge, the pale priest paced before her

restlessly, and began his story, while Le Corbeau leaned upon her elbow—watching—watching.

"Cécile has told you of my childhood. It was a happy one, and when I advanced in years I was happier still, for I had all that makes life worth the living—youth, strength, and wealth . . . wealth—the key which opens the gates of the world and makes the soul a heaven or a hell. My mother was Italian. My father, French, and of the army. From him I imbibed the instincts of a soldier, but through the foreign blood came my restless spirit, a passionate longing for reckless venture—a hot, ungoverned will, a heart that loved and hated by fitful turns. And so I lived—lived like a butterfly, without a thought beyond my wayward will . . . and through it all I had one friend who loved me, and whom I loved—Fabien Lamont . . . a noble friend—noble in every fibre. Unlike me, he was cool and calm, thought first and acted afterward, while I—but it matters little."

He paused, and strode in moody silence to and fro.

"Yes, Léon," his listener whispered. "Go on."

"There was wine—rivers of wine . . . dice . . . and worse. Pah! what a life! My soul grows sick at memory of it. . . . One night I was quarrelling with Fabien; the cause I know not, for my senses were over-steeped in drink. He reasoned with me gently, but I was mad with anger—flung my glove into his face and drew my sword. . . . Oh, Adrienne," he cried out bitterly, "I cannot tell it! No, I cannot!"

"Tell me, Léon . . . tell me all."

And so he told her how he had fought with Fabien in a drunken rage, urging naught in palliation of his deed, but like a flagellant laid bare his tortured flesh to a self-inflicted scourge. He told his story to its bitter end; told how he had flung himself in an agony of grief beside his dying friend. The tears, unchecked, rolled slowly down, and his words, scarce audible, were uttered brokenly:

"Ah, then I laid my head upon his breast and sobbed and sobbed, kissing his cheek and begging him to live. . . . He died with his hand clasped tight in mine . . . forgiveness on his lips."

The priest ceased speaking, dropped wearily into a seat beside his listener, and bowed his

head in grief unutterable. Le Corbeau took his hand and pressed it tenderly:

"My poor, poor Léon, how my heart is bleeding for the cross you bear. And then?"

"I fled from Italy to France, and sought Sébastian, Father of the House of Peace. To him I made confession, and asked to give my life in atonement for the evil I had done."

"And do you feel," she asked, "that you have been forgiven?"

"Forgiveness is the choicest gem in the crown of God."

"And since then you have never spoken?" she questioned presently.

"No word has passed my lips, and yet—the hateful secret has dragged at my heart until I could cry aloud with pain."

A wondrous pity flashed on Le Corbeau's soul, a mighty longing to lift him up from the slough of black repentance into joyous peace. No thought of evil marred her pure desire; but, alas! she knew not that in pity lay his direst snare—and hers.

"Léon," she said, "I fear there is one great lesson you have never learned."

"And that?"

"In your gentle ministry to the grief of others did you never think that what you do for them might also be done for you? Are there *no* hearts to share your sorrow as you share theirs, and by tenderness to help you bear your pain? Léon . . . have you never loved?"

He shook his head. "Deeply—no."

"Ah, then, you do not know. You seek for light where the sun can never shine. Can sorrow hide itself beneath a cloak and cowl? Is the memory of a sin less dark when shadowed by the darker shadow of the Church? No, no, dear friend. Only in love may such a secret be forgotten."

The priest withdrew his hand from hers and answered nervously: "Speak not of it—I beg you—I——"

She leaned toward him and rested her hand upon his shoulder. "I must . . . and to you."

"No, no . . . no!" he muttered helplessly, and shrank away, but Le Corbeau paused not in her speech; and the warm blood, hurtling through her veins, quenched the last pitying spark:

"Have you never known the tenderness of a

woman's smile—the touch of her gentle hand—her soft caress—the sound of her voice that haunts you everywhere——"

"Adrienne!" he gasped, and rose as if to flee from her, paused and lingered in irresolution.

"—the ear that listens for your footstep, and the lips that meet your own in the glory of a kiss . . . the kiss that thrills and burns——"

"Adrienne! Mademoiselle—in mercy—cease!"

He crossed the room, staggered and clutched at a velvet portière, then turned and lifted his hand to speak; but she checked him with a glance.

"Will you always live so, Léon, lonely and sad at heart . . . with none to love you with the lasting love for which your soul cries out?"

The priest crouched, shivering, against the wall, raising his arms to shut the sight of her from his dazzled eyes, but her purring voice, with its low, melodious roll, knocked at his listening heart till the door of passion tottered on its hinge.

"Tell me no more!" he gasped. "I cannot listen! I dare not listen!"

"Dare not? Will you pass the cup untasted then?—the cup that brims with the bubbling joy of love? In all the world is there no one to take you by the hand . . . and lead you home?"

With a cry, half inarticulate, he sprang toward her, his fierce words tumbling from delirious lips:

"Yes, there is one! One who could lift me up till my soul should sing in heavenly happiness. . . . One who could bring forgetfulness and peace. . . . One who could change the throb of loneliness to a cry of ecstasy. . . . One who could lead me where she wills. Oh! could I lay my head upon her breast and weep—to catch the perfume of her breath—to touch her lips with mine——"

The temptress stretched out her white, bare arms; her eyes looked hungrily into his; and he stooped to clasp her in his rough desire.

"Adrienne! My——"

With a backward wrench he flung her arms apart and stood before her, quivering, with hands pressed tight against his throbbing temples.

"O God!" he cried, "I am mad! Mad! Mad!" and stumbled blindly from the room, his loosened rosary falling at Le Corbeau's feet.

She sat in rigid silence, while her heart-beats counted twice a score, then cried out sharply:

"Monsieur Jardin! . . . the game is finished! . . . I have won!"

She stooped and raised the rosary from the floor and ran the string in silence through her idle fingers.

"Yesterday . . . one bead upon this rosary was mine; . . . but now . . . I own it all!" Once more her voice rose shrill and harsh in the notes of unholy triumph: "Did I not know it! Did I not tell them I would break his cross—even as I rend this fallen emblem of his faith!"

With a vicious jerk she snapped the fragile string, stopped suddenly, and gazed in frozen horror as the loosened beads rolled down her lap and clattered to the floor. She swayed and slid from the lounge upon her knees a stricken, wilted thing.

"O God, forgive me! God forgive me!" she moaned in a stifled whisper. "Léon! . . . Léon! . . . Léon! . . ."



With a vicious jerk she snapped the fragile string

CHAPTER XII

THAT night, as Jardin reached home from a long and belated visit to a patient, his attention was attracted by a feeble whine which seemed to rise from close beside his door-step. He peered into the darkness, but nothing could be seen; so he entered the house and returned with a lighted candle; and as its rays dispelled the shadows he discovered, first, a trickling stream of blood, and then a wounded terrier crouched, shivering, in a draughty corner.

The doctor stooped and petted it, speaking in a kindly, coaxing tone, then lifted the dog and carried it to the room in which his patients were received. There he laid the sufferer gently upon his table, and with heated water cleansed an ugly wound.

The terrier shrank beneath the physician's touch, moaning piteously, for the lacerated leg was badly broken, hanging limp and twisted on the shoulder joint. The doctor saw that ere the

bone was set the jagged cut must needs be closed with a stitch or two; so, after stroking the trembling head, he held the limb and passed his needle through the lip of the fevered wound. The dog snarled viciously and sank his teeth in the doctor's hand.

Jardin, with a curse, seized on a heavy iron poker, and raised it above his head. In an instant more the tortured beast would pay the price of ingratitude, and a man, in passion, would do another deed of cruelty, and forget it when his hurt was healed. The weapon hovered in his bleeding hand, sank slowly to the floor, and was set again in its place against the wall.

"Poor little brute," the doctor muttered tenderly, "you bit because of the pain you could not bear—the pain, old fellow . . . and I think I understand."

Jardin first cauterized his wound and bound it in a healing salve, then brought a bowl of milk and placed it before the shivering offender. After many a soothing word and soft caress the terrier forgot its fears and lapped up the offering greedily.

Then the doctor smiled his lazy smile, and once more passed his needle through the flesh. "Steady, little one," he warned, and drew the stitch. The terrier whimpered, raised its head, and licked the doctor's hand.

"Bravo! 'Twas bravely borne. Again—'twill hurt, I know, but we'll grin and bear it, you and I. . . . There! 'Tis done at last!"

He set the broken leg, and bound it in a tiny wooden splint, then tenderly placed his last, but not his least, grateful patient on a padded chair beside his bed.

When the lights were out, the patient, even with the throb of a mangled limb, at length forgot its misery and slept—but the doctor lay awake. The morning came, and the little dog awoke, remembered, and once more licked the hand.

When the priest retreated from Le Corbeau's power, he paused not, nor gave a backward glance, but with his white face muffled in his cowl fled swiftly, lest he weaken and return. He hastened onward, he knew not, cared not,

where, his hot brain spinning in a madman's dream. A sweat of terror started on his brow; he was faint and sick, yet his muscles strained to carry him away from the voice that dinned in his throbbing ears, from the rounded arms that stretched to him in their glory of youth and love, the eyes which a man might follow through the murk of purgatory.

An aged woman, from an upper window, called shrilly as he passed, but he paid no heed. A troop of children hailed him with a laughing shout, clutching at his skirts with their chubby hands; he rudely brushed them from his path and hurried on, while the little ones, in wide-mouthed wonder, stood staring till he disappeared from sight.

Northward he pushed and crossed the city's line, still northward, till The House of Peace rose suddenly into view among the trees of the cloister garden. He halted, passed his hand across his eyes in numb bewilderment, then made a wide detour, and came at last to the river bank as the sun was setting. Here in the cool and solitude he would rest and think. Think! No, no, for thought was hell!

He cast aside his garments and plunged into the Seine, buffeting the current with his splendid strength; but in the cooling ripples of the stream he seemed to hear her voice again—calling, calling, till his senses reeled in sweet delirium. He shouted aloud to drown the murmuring cry, but the echoes laughed from the wooded shore in mockery.

He clothed himself and turned from the river's bank to a lonely road which stretched before him in the deepening twilight. Along its way he hurried, his hands pressed tight upon his ears to shut out the haunting sound of lapping waves, pursuing him in dull monotony. At length he ran—ran till his knees gave way beneath his weight, and his hammering heart churned fiercely and was like to burst. And still he heard her call—heard it in the very beat of his pain-racked heart. Then the erring priest sank panting in the dust, cried out to his God in misery . . . and was answered not.

The hours slipped by; the weary priest came back once more to the gateway of The House of Peace and crept unnoticed to his cell. Still clothed in his soiled and dishevelled cassock he

flung himself upon his couch, to toss in sleepless agony, for she followed even there. Her white hands seemed to shake the iron windows bars, and her great, deep eyes looked down appealingly.

He turned his face against the rough stone wall, but through the darkness he heard her whisper still—that maddening murmur that would never cease, floating through the stillness of his narrow room, throbbing with his quickened pulses, or echoed in the solemn stroke of a distant bell: "Léon . . . have you never loved . . . nor known the tenderness of a woman's smile . . . the touch of her gentle hand . . . the soft caress . . . the sound of her voice that haunts you everywhere the ear that listens for your footstep, and the lips that meet your own in the glory of a kiss . . . the kiss that thrills and burns——"

Poor human heart, forget her if you can! Fate's sculptor carves too deep—each chisel stroke a memory till death. Plead—plead with your far, unheeding Heaven, and beat your burning hands against the wall! You live! You love! Your passions, chained by prayer and

penance, are loosed at last! Forget her if you can! . . . As well pray back the ocean's ebbing tide, or preach God's mercy to a mother's hard-eyed grief as she strains to her breast the lifeless body of the first-born.

When the first grey streak of morning crept stealthily through the low-barred window of his cell, the priest had sunk into a troubled sleep. Fate's sculptor cast aside his tools; he knew that his work was finished.

CHAPTER XIII

NEXT day, as Le Corbeau chanced to stand upon her balcony, she saw the priest in the street below. She leaned across the railing and tried to call, but the words stuck, choking, in her throat, while her handkerchief slipped from her trembling hand and fluttered to his feet. He stopped, looked upward, and with a sudden start beheld her standing there, then bowed his head, and passed along his way. The day dragged on; Le Corbeau waited, but the priest came not. A longer night, again a longer day, and still she listened for the footstep which she knew must come.

"Surely, it can't be long," she muttered as she sat beside the window. "Two nights—two weary days since I left the palace. Soon he will seek me. He must! A heart like his, once stirred, will torture itself into submission, will override his reason, outweigh his faith, and bind him with a chain which only death . . . or

I can break. But if he should not come? . . . He must! He shall! Have I not touched the deepest chord that lay hidden in his breast? . . . " She bowed her head upon her hands and murmured sadly: " He touched a deeper one in mine. . . . Léon, Léon, 'tis you have won . . . not I! . . . Why need I hide the truth? I've played the game! I've lost! I love him! . . . I gambled with his soul—the stake, five hundred thousand francs and a woman's vanity; but now—but now the stake is higher . . . a woman's life!"

She rose and paced her wide salon in feverish unrest. "And this is home," she sneered. "Home! How different from Cécile's! . . . And to think that I have lived content in this tawdry sty—listened to the songs and laughter of drunken men and women—men and women whom I called my friends! *Pah!* . . . And tomorrow they will come again . . . drink my wine and applaud my latest conquest! Oh, if I could once forget it all—fly from this hated place . . . with him!" She clenched her hands and murmured in a low, fierce whisper: "And why should I not? . . . If I can live in happi-

ness and peace—live in some other land, and forget the nightmare of my wretched past . . . even as Léon shall forget the priest . . . and Fabien. And yet—" She paused and sank upon her lounge in thought: "Ah, me—Jardin was right. . . . The game is not finished yet—not yet—not yet——"

A door in the rear was softly opened and a maid appeared. "Pardon, madame——"

"Yes, Louise?" Le Corbeau questioned, languidly.

"Monsieur l'Abbé is at the door and begs the honour of a word with you."

Le Corbeau started. "*Dieu!* . . . so soon?" she gasped, then turned to the maid excitedly, "For whom did he ask, Louise?"

"For Mademoiselle du Langois."

The Poppy Flower breathed easily again. "Yes," she said. "You may show him in, Louise." The servant turned to go. "And Louise . . . see that I am undisturbed until the father leaves. I'm at home to no one—understand me—no one."

"Yes, madame." And Louise departed. Le Corbeau sat pale and motionless.

"I knew he would come. . . . I knew it! And still—still I am afraid. Will he know?" she asked herself. "Will he read in my face the thing I am—here in this hateful place—this—ah, God, he must not! Must not!"

She heard his step and rose, trembling, to meet him. The priest came slowly forward, his pale face pinched and worn with suffering, his sad eyes dull from sleeplessness.

"Adrienne," he said in a voice which was scarce his own, "Adrienne, I have come . . . and— Are we quite alone?"

Le Corbeau nodded, for she dared not trust herself to speak.

"Your brother?"

"My—my brother," she stammered in confusion, "he—he will not be here to-night. We are quite alone." She pointed to a chair. "You will be seated—Father——"

He sadly shook his head. "You are thoughtful, Adrienne, but I have only a word to say and then I will leave you . . . forever."

"Forever, Léon?"

"Yes. . . . I could not leave without that word. . . . It is weak and selfish—but I could

not." He dropped his eyes and stood before her silent and abashed.

"Ah, Léon," she murmured gently, "I fear the priest has done injustice to the man."

He raised his hand and answered in a hard, cold tone:

"No. . . . The priest is just . . . but the man is weaker than the priest. Adrienne . . . I have come to speak the truth. Did I seek to disguise my motive or excuse it 'twould be unmanly and unjust—unjust to you and cowardly to myself. In my early life I was thrown with many women—some irreproachable, but I gave them little thought; others of another stamp—those pitiful tempters of the world—a curse to God, to man, and to themselves."

Le Corbeau paled and shrank before him, but he paid no heed.

"And so I lived in ignorance of the highest gift of Heaven—the love of a pure, good woman."

"And now?" she asked, a quaver in her tone.

"I know . . . but know too well. When I left the world and took orders, I strove to forget the life I once had led—to bury it in the grave

with Fabien. But I could not forget—despise me if you will—I could not! It lived with me day and night, hovering like a vulture in my dreams: whispering of all the happiness of a life unshackled, mocking my puny faith, pleading with my wayward, restless spirit, dragging me back to the glad, sweet world so full of joy . . . and sin."

"My poor, poor Léon!" his listener whispered tenderly.

He lifted his hand to check her sympathy, and spoke again:

"I strove to crush the thought, but the great red giant lived. He mastered me, mind and soul; and then—and then you came."

"Léon!" she cried, reproachfully.

"There," he said, "bear with me but a little while; it is finished soon, and I will go. I did not know until too late that I loved you—loved you till the sweetness of the thought was pain. A poor, weak fool—I sought to shut you from my heart, but your image came ever back to me, even when I knelt before my crucifix. For me, no rest . . . no sleep . . . no hope. If I wandered through the streets, the people looked

at me with their searching gaze, seeming to read my secret, even as I read it now; knowing that beneath the robe of a priest of God beats the heart of a man—a heart that cries out for a woman's love, and will not be hushed or comforted."

The priest was silent. Le Corbeau bit her lips, and after a time said sorrowfully: "Léon, I grieve that I cause you all this suffering. I did not mean you wrong, believe me; and yet—reproach strikes far more deep when undeserved."

"I do not reproach you, Adrienne. How can you think it?"

She turned upon him sharply: "Then why did you come? Why did you tell me? Why?"

"Because of a will that is stronger than my own—a will that makes me weak and pitiful. Call it cowardice—choose the name; I came because I could not help but come."

"The priest or the man?"

"Both. . . . The man, to tell you that he loved. . . . The priest, to say farewell."

"And will the priest forget?" Léon slowly shook his head. "Does he wish it?"

"No!" he answered bitterly. "Listen, Adri-

enne. . . . I prayed to Heaven for help and guidance, but when I lifted up my eyes I saw your face—your smile, which seemed to beckon me . . . and then I knew that the lips alone asked God to crush a love to which my soul was clinging with all its strength and life. I prayed with the lips—not with the heart—and at such a mockery the devil laughs."

Again the priest was silent. Le Corbeau turned away and seated herself in earnest thought. When a moment passed and he did not speak, she called him:

"Léon . . . You have told me that you love me. You tell me that you have suffered, and will suffer more. What is it that you would tell me still?"

"There is nothing," he replied, with attempted calmness. "You have listened patiently to my story of folly and unworthiness. I am grateful for your forbearance . . . and ask for naught. I have told you that I loved, but in sadness and remorse. For the man, there might be hope; for the priest—none. There is only one more word to say in parting."

"And that?"

The priest held out his strong, lean hand: "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered in a tone expressionless and chill.

For an instant her hand hung passively in his and fell; for a moment more the priest looked down upon her, with all the wreck of an earthly joy in his moistened eyes; then he touched her dusky hair with his finger tips—touched it tenderly, and turned away.

Le Corbeau listened to his retreating footsteps, each a bruise upon her heart, and knew that did he leave her now no power of hers would ever bring him back again. If his lifelong love were the buoy to save her from a sea of sin, she must grasp it ere the ebbing tide could sweep them far apart. She must fight, fight—as women before her fought, and shall for all time—as women, for the price of love, have shaken empires to their deepest buried stone and flung them, crashing, in the dust—a rotting monument to the heart of one weak man.

"*Léon!*"

He turned in hesitancy and came slowly back to her.

"Léon, is this all that you would say to me?"

"All that I can," he answered sadly. "Yes, it is all. But why?"

"Why?" she repeated, with a touch of scorn, "why? Because I had hoped you were at least more generous. Because I had hoped that the love of which you boast would lift you above the level of other men."

"Boast?"

"Ay, boast! What else?"

"I—I do not understand."

"No!" she retorted in a rising tone of anger and contempt. "No! for you're a man! Men never understand. They come to us—without reproach—saying their lives are wrecked because of us; telling us their souls are tortured with a love that can never be, and then—and then they say good-bye. And you are like the rest!"

"Adrienne!"

"It is true!" she cried, and rose from her seat excitedly. "It is true! Man follows his own device. Forgets? Not always. No . . . for he does not try. He takes a melancholy memory

to his heart, treasuring it grain by grain, nursing it until it grows into a monster, to make a mournful martyr of his selfishness. . . . So much for the man. But what of the woman? Do you think she does not suffer? Is it nothing to her that a life is wrecked; that the man she loves goes from her in despair? Does the woman forget? Does she not love as deeply as the man? You tell me of a cross too heavy for you to bear. You wake my pity and compassion . . . then tell me 'tis all in vain. A woman weeps in silence. The man must cry aloud his suffering, lest the woman escape without a pang. You call it weakness, and ask me to choose its name. . . . I choose it! 'Tis cowardly and cruel!"

"You purposely pervert my meaning, Adrienne."

"Am I a child?" she flashed. "Why did you tell me. Why?"

Léon raised his hand, but let it fall dejectedly.

"You are right," he murmured. "It was ignoble—yes, and cruel, though I meant it not. I dare not hope for the last forgiveness which I

ask . . . and yet I ask it. I am a priest—bound by my sacred vows. What have I to offer?"

"I know, I know," she assented, with a frown; "to carry out your work of mercy you must not be hampered by a woman." She turned upon him fiercely: "And is my love so venomous a thing that charity is killed because of it?"

"Adrienne—I beg you——"

"Can good deeds blossom only in a priestly soil? Can a woman not help a man in his work of mercy? Is her hand less gentle or her heart less true? *Pardi!* we women give you flesh and bone, bear you in death-gripped agony, and still—poor patient fools—what know we of the road to human suffering?" And Le Corbeau turned away and flung herself into a seat, her bosom heaving with the rush of heated blood.

"Child, child," he reasoned bitterly, "you do not understand. The Church is the mighty barrier that bars our will. The Church, which stifles the words of love that rise to my lips; the pledge of celibacy, that makes a barren desert of my life; my vow to Heaven, which crushes hope and happiness. If I took you for my wife,

what would be the end? Excommunication—the curse of God."

"And your fear is greater than your love?"

"No; . . . but reason cries a warning which even love must heed. The brothers of my Order would tear me from your arms, . . . and you, poor child, would suffer as well as I. Where, where in France could we escape their hatred or revenge?"

"Is France the world?"

Léon took one swift, involuntary step, and paused—wonder, fear, devotion struggling for the master-grip; and the woman watched him silently, knowing that his will was shackled by a puny vow which soon must snap beneath the weight of passion's hammer stroke. But Faith was battling for her son in mute despair—mute, but unconquered still, so long as the priest could shield her with his cross. Le Corbeau saw him waver, clench his trembling fists, and move for a backward step; her eyes sought his in a quick, compelling glance; her hand crept slowly out to him, was caught in a fervid grasp, and he sank on his knees beside her, speaking brokenly:

"And would you give up all for me? Would

you take me in my weakness and the sin of forsaken faith? Would you follow me to some other country, where we could forget my failure, and remember only—only that we love?"

"Wait!" Le Corbeau rose and stood before him, resolved to sunder the last frail link which bound him to his cloth. "Wait! Had you the choice between loving as you do and the power to forget that you had ever known, which would you choose? Which?"

Léon hesitated still. Le Corbeau knew that if she would win the priest she must win him now, or sink herself beyond redemption's pale; and she faced the crisis fearlessly. She spoke in a voice low, passionless and cold:

"Think while there is time. . . . Think of what you are giving up and the path our feet must tread. Think of yourself, your sister, and of me—of what the world will say of us: the scorn, the ridicule. Léon . . . would you love me . . . or forget?"

"I would love!" he answered, tremulously, and took her in his arms; "love with a depth and tenderness which heaven itself might smile upon, forgetting only that I had ever lived with-

out it. Ah, Adrienne, 'tis like awakening from a curse of haunted sleep."

"And are you glad to wake, my Léon?"

"Glad? Dear God, how glad! And you? You will be happy with me, Adrienne?"

For a moment she was silent, then murmured musingly:

"Perhaps—perhaps——"

"Adrienne!"

She twined her arms about his neck and looked into his eyes:

"Léon . . . I love you—with all my heart and soul and mind. Life with you will be like a sinner's glimpse of heaven, and yet——"

"And yet?" he asked in an eager whisper.

"'Tis not the future which frightens me, but the past. Listen, dear one: I know that you love me with a love which is almost worship; but a time may come when regret will creep into your heart—regret for the life you are giving up—the broken rosary, the robe which you lay aside."

"Adrienne," he answered solemnly, "the robe of the Holy Church I have loved . . . and love it still; but to the cassock, once laid aside, there

is no return. I will step from an old world into a new, a better and a fairer; and with your dear hand to help and guide, no shadow of regret need ever darken the door of peace and purity."

She raised her lips to his. "Then, like all women, I will trust. The past we will bury—I with you and you with me. When Paris is left behind, the phantom of our other selves shall be locked within its gates. We will cease to speak of what has been, and build our hope on present joy and joys to come. Shall we, my Léon?"

"Yes, Adrienne," he murmured tenderly; "yes."

For a short half hour they sat together in their new-found happiness: the priest, who would leave a mistaken calling as rashly as he entered it ten years before, and the Poppy Flower, who had laughed aloud in her pit of shame, and climbed to repentance on a rope of lies.

Their plans were quickly laid: they would slip away from Paris on the following night, go to Calais, and thence to England, the priest in disguise, and she also if occasion so demanded. An hour was appointed for departure, and she

gave him a key by which to enter in case her maid should be asleep. Then Léon rose and bade her a short farewell.

"Good-bye," he whispered, "for a little while —and then——"

"And then for our sweet, new world," she answered, with a smile. "A last, sad tear for the old one left behind . . . and life will begin anew."

He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, passed from the home of the Poppy Flower, and bent his buoyant steps toward the distant House of Peace.

Le Corbeau watched him from her balcony till he turned and waved his hand and his robe was hidden from her tear-blind eyes. Then slowly she returned; slowly one by one her candles were extinguished, and darkness shut her old, familiar room from sight.

A something stirred within her heart—restless, strange. It burned, it glowed, it shook her in its might, till her trembling limbs gave way beneath her and she fell on her knees in prayer. . . . The first for many a year—a prayer to Léon's God, through the mercy of the Holy

Virgin. A poor, weak prayer, in stumbling, ill-selected words, torn from a stained but repentant breast, and laid in fear at the footstool of the Father's pity. A broken prayer—broken by a woman's sobs, which she and the Mother, alone, could understand.

CHAPTER XIV

On the following day Le Corbeau made the last arrangement for her flight. She loosely packed such light apparel as was necessary for the journey; the rest she would leave behind. Among her jewels was a faded leathern case containing gems which her mother once had worn, and these she sold for a modest sum to guard against a chance contingency. There were other gems, gems of price, a glittering store, enough to fill the hollow of her palms, but she flung them from her, with a blush of shame, cleansing her hands.

The day slipped by; the twilight deepened into dusk, and at last but an hour remained till the coming of the priest. Le Corbeau waited in her candle-lit salon—waited, with a wildly beating heart, for what the future held in its tight-closed hand. Would the fingers open at the voice of love and shower happiness into her lifted arms? Would memory of the priest and Fabien sleep in the cradle of a darker mem-

ory which she herself must leave behind? As if in answer to her thought a shout of laughter burst from the street below, and Le Corbeau listened, whitening to the lips. She knew that sound—La Rose—Lizette—the rest of them! Some one beat impatiently upon the outer door. It opened, and she heard the scramble of their feet upon the stair and the light-lipped chatter of the creatures who, alas! had been her friends. She arose and listened in trembling dread as the sounds drew nearer still, and then, with a gesture of repulsion and disgust, turned and fled to the safety of her chamber.

In they trooped, a dozen reckless cavaliers and as many freshly powdered ladies, laughing, jesting, in the loose-tongued freedom of the *demi-monde*.

"*À la bonne heure!*" La Rose cried merrily. "'Tis twenty years, it seems, since I saw Corbeau."

"That's nothing," laughed Lizette; "the time we've lost is soon made up again. Oh, but I long for the flying corks once more, and to see the golden wine . . . Pop! F-i-zzzzz! Ah!"

"See it!" giggled Violette. "*Mon Dieu*, I'd

rather taste it! Raymond," she called, "in the name of thirst, have you dared to lose that precious basket?"

"Coming!" Raymond shouted, and entered with a laden basket on his arm, while the company gathered clamorously about him.

"Come," said La Rose, "we'll dispense with serving maids to-night, and each must lend a hand in the interest of Le Corbeau's feast."

"Delightful!" tittered Violette; "a cosy supper, *en famille*, on the prodigal's return."

"True," assented Raymond, as he handed out the wine and fruit, "but I wish we had Duchant, the poet. *Ma foi*, what a splendid substitute he'd make for the fatted calf!"

This sally was met by a burst of merriment, and all agreed that the dish would be a perfect poem in itself; but here their jest was interrupted by a noise of scuffling feet upon the stairs, and a woman's voice rose shrill and angry:

"Let me go, I tell you! I will scream! *Peste!* Let me go!"

The company paused to listen, and heard Duchant himself reply:

"Come on, my little wild-cat! *Diable!* You shall come with me, even if I'm forced to lift you on my back! Come on!"

"Now, by St. Dunstan," Raymond laughed, "the fatted calf is here in answer to my prayer."

The door flew open, and the poet struggled in, dragging by the hand a flushed and rumpled girl—small, scarce grown, but angry as a routed wasp.

"Who is she?" cried the company, as they pressed around Duchant. "Where did you find the child?" and a score of other excited questions, fired in swift succession. The rhymester grinned.

"Who is she? Faith! I've not the faintest notion, and that's the drollest part of it. As I stood upon the door-step, she stopped and asked that I direct her to Mademoiselle Dufresnoy, who— There! Stop pulling!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" the girl still cried, as she tugged to free herself, then turning to the group of gentlemen, she asked appealingly: "Ah, messieurs, you will help me, will you not? I came to bring a hat and feather to

Ma'm'selle Dufresnoy—a hat from my mother's shop — Madame Cigogne, the milliner. He caught me—this ugly man—he caught me by the hand." Again she struggled to loose the hold upon her wrist. "Let go! Let go!"

"Stop it, you little beggar!" Duchant commanded, then pursued his explanation: "I told her that I knew no mademoiselle of such a name; but I saw that she was saucy and would make rich sport for Le Corbeau's feast, and so I—er—and so I asked her in."

"I'm not a beggar, nor am I saucy! Let me go!"

La Rose stepped forward. "Let her go, Duchant, you bruise her wrist."

"Oh, no!" the captor laughed. "The prisoner's mine. I caught the little monkey, and she shall not get away."

"Little monkey, eh?" the girl flashed angrily. "Then I'll show you, sir, how a monkey bites!" And with a lightning swoop she sank her teeth in the poet's hand.

"*Christi*, she has bitten me!" screeched Duchant, as he loosened his hold and nursed his afflicted fist.

"And serve you right," said Raymond, with a laugh, which was joined by all the gentlemen.

"She's bitten deep, the beggar!" cried Duchant, and stepped threateningly toward the girl; but Raymond interposed.

"Come, come, Duchant," he said, "you'll not go mad from a little pinch like this. Indeed, monsieur, it should be a pleasure to be bitten by such pretty teeth." He turned, with a smile, to the trembling girl: "Eh, Poupée?"

"Ah! It is you, Monsieur Delese!" she chirped delightedly. "Oh, ho! I have a friend!" And she ran to his protection, while the laughing ladies jeered him mercilessly.

"Fie, fie, monsieur!" they cried. "Another cat has jumped its bag! And a woman untied the string!" And Raymond found himself the target for an hundred jesting shots.

"Oh, yes," he laughed. "We are friends, Poupée and I, great friends. But come—a glass of wine for the valiant little prisoner!"

"No, no, monsieur," Poupée protested. "Ma'm'selle is waiting for her hat and feather, and will scold me for my tardiness."

"But only one, Poupée," urged Raymond, "only a little glass, then I myself will see you safe to ma'm'selle's door."

"Oh, thank you, monsieur," she said, and clapped her hands. "You are good—so good to me."

She drank her wine, and turned to leave, but La Rose detained her.

"Wait! You must pay a ransom before you go. Prisoners always do, you know. Can you sing, child?"

"Yes—yes—ma'm'selle, but——"

"A song! A song!" they urged, and formed a ring about her; so, seeing that protest availed her nothing, Poupée sang a saucy little air, to the keen delight of her merry listeners.

"*Vive Poupée, le petit singe!*" laughed Monsieur Chatillon, and raised his glass; and the cheer still echoed when Raymond and the little milliner had reached the street.

"Come," called La Rose, when the noise had in some degree subsided. "We must get the feast in readiness. Has any one seen Corbeau? I vow I had quite forgotten her."

"Lizette has gone to look for her," said Vio-

lette. "I suppose she was dressing when we came. Ah! Here she is!"

Le Corbeau entered, but without that joyous smile of welcome which her former friends anticipated.

"Welcome home!" called Violette, effusively.

A shout arose. "Corbeau! Corbeau! Long live the queen of love!" And several gentlemen began to sing, while the guests pressed closely around the prodigal.

"There, there," Le Corbeau said, in ill-concealed annoyance; "don't sing, I beg you; it—it hurts my ears."

"We are making ready a feast for you," cried Violette, "and *such* a feast! There is wine and fruit and——"

"I know, I know," Le Corbeau interrupted; "but not so loud, please; and—don't crowd around me—it—it——"

"Why, what's the matter?" asked La Rose. "You seem so different——"

"We only thought to please you," snapped Lizette.

"Yes, yes, but you're so—so noisy. . . . You need not shout and scream. It—it annoys me."

Le Corbeau crossed to her lounge and sank upon it wearily. A painful pause ensued, and the wonder-stricken guests watched furtively and whispered among themselves.

Monsieur Duval stepped forward with a glass of wine, and spoke in not ungentle tones: "Drink this, Corbeau; 'twill serve, I trust, to raise your spirits."

"Thank you—no," she answered with a gesture of impatience. "I do not care for it. I—take it away, please . . . "

"A sweet, sweet humour she is in," whispered La Rose to Violette. "So appreciative of our proffered kindness."

"Yes," the other laughed. "The Good Samaritan might have taught her better manners. By the way, I'll ask about her capture." She turned, with a smirk, and called: "Come, what of the handsome priest? You have not told us yet."

"Yes, tell us," the others chimed. "Did the father convert Corbeau, or has Monsieur, the Devil, gained a new disciple? Where is your cloak and cowl?"

Thus they questioned, jokingly, their coarse-

ness grating like a rasp upon her nerves; but she made no answer to the bantering gibes, submitting mutely to the torture of their tongues.

"You seem to have lost that cooing voice of yours," sneered Violette. "Did you also lose five hundred thousand francs, my dear?"

Le Corbeau rose from her seat in hopelessness, muttering between her teeth: "I cannot stand it! I *cannot!*" She turned to her guests with a stammering apology: "My friends—I know that you have come with the best intent; I know that what you have done is—is for my pleasure. I—I appreciate—but I'm ill—my head is dizzy—I——"

Here Raymond entered, and she crossed and met him at the door.

"A word with you!" She took her friend aside, and begged, in a panting whisper: "Raymond, in the name of pity, take them away! They will drive me mad—*mad*, I tell you! From head to heel my nerves are quivering!"

"Yes, yes," he said, "I understand. I was wrong to let them come." He turned to La Rose and asked: "Can we not postpone our

feast? Le Corbeau is greatly indisposed and wishes to be quiet."

"Hmp!" sniffed Violette. "Corbeau is in a nasty temper. That's where the trouble lies."

"We'll leave her to her prayers and beads," said La Rose, with a toss of her fluffy head. "The beads upon our wine are flat, it seems. Come, we'll have our feast without the gentle sister." She courtesied mockingly. "We'll leave thee for the nonce, O Mother Superior!" And the women's laughter, which echoed through the room, was shrill and bitter.

"Raymond . . . please—" Le Corbeau desperately implored.

He whispered to La Rose, and besought her aid in dispersing the guests without delay, but when his back was turned Lizette said, spitefully:

"I see, Corbeau; you are weary of our company. You've grown too good for us! But suppose, my dear, we leave you the wine. . . . I swear you are not too good for that!"

"Lizette," Le Corbeau answered, with an effort to be calm, "I have no wish to be unkind, and if I seem so, believe me, I am sorry. I

have told you I am ill and wish to rest. I—I——"

Once more she turned to Raymond, pleadingly: "Raymond, . . . will they never go?"

She crossed the room and dropped upon her lounge in utter weariness, while Raymond sought to soothe the angered ladies, whose vanity resented, hotly, what they termed a flout to their well-meant ministrations. With many a sneering undertone and spiteful glance the hamper was refilled with the fruit and wine, and at last the uninvited guests filed slowly out in ruffled dignity, and the bold, harsh clatter of their tongues was stilled.

As Raymond, the last to leave, was passing out, Le Corbeau caught his hand.

"Not you," she whispered, "but they—the others—set me shuddering. Ah, my friend, if you only knew!"

"I think I understand," he answered gently. "To-morrow I will come alone. Till then, good-bye."

She raised his hand and touched it with her lips.

"*Au revoir*, dear Raymond. . . . *Au revoir*."

When Raymond, too, had gone, the one of all her friends who still seemed near to her, she flung her windows open and breathed the fresh, pure air in grateful gasps.

"Ah, well," she sighed, "'tis the last of them . . . and I shall not grieve." She crossed to a seat and sat in reverie. "To-night I will leave it all behind me, and forget . . . forget that I was once a part of it, and did not stifle in its poisoned atmosphere. . . . How strange a thing is love, . . . teaching us to loathe a life which once was dear to us, . . . whispering that, after all, another life may wait beyond—a better . . . and a fairer. . . . Perhaps—perhaps——"

CHAPTER XV

ONCE more Le Corbeau waited for the coming of the priest. She heard a footstep, and her heart beat faster, but chilled as her name was called:

"Corbeau."

"The last," she muttered, "and the worst! This at least I hoped that fate would spare me."

Jardin came slowly forward; his words were gently spoken, and without his drawl.

"Your pardon, madame, that I entered unannounced. I was asked by Duchant to join his friends an hour ago, but I did not care to come with—with the rest of them."

Le Corbeau answered coldly. She neither rose nor looked at him.

"I congratulate you upon your taste. You were fortunate to escape the noisy clatter of their tongues . . . and the wit—*grand Dieu*—the wit!"

The doctor nodded. "At worst, I might have helped to quiet them."

"No! Nothing would quiet them. Nothing! Their voices were loud and shrill and coarse and vulgar. I could not stand it. I fear I was very rude, for I sent them all away. I wished to be alone."

"I see," the doctor smiled. "And does the empress still hold that wish?"

"Monsieur has said it. . . . *I* did not."

"Well answered," laughed Jardin. "Your reward shall take the form of a short-lived visit. I came, Corbeau, partly on business—partly pleasure—for I'm glad that you've returned, more glad than I can say."

"And your quarrel with Raymond?" she asked.

"I called upon him yesterday, apologized for my boorish conduct, and asked forgiveness—as I hope for yours."

She gave him her hand. "I thank you, Jardin; there is good in your nature, after all."

"A little, yes," the doctor granted; "but a sickly plant at best. There is still another matter which prompts my coming."

"And that?"

"Oh, a small affair. I came to ask if I owed five hundred thousand francs."

"You owe me nothing."

"H-m-m! Then you did not win the priest?"

She was silent for a moment, then answered calmly:

"I won."

"Then I fail to see the matter in your light," the doctor argued. "If the wager is fairly lost, I, for my part, have no desire to shirk its payment; but as a loser I would ask one favour."

"Yes?"

"I should like to witness the completion of your conquest. Why could I not remain here in concealment?—say, behind that screen—and when the eager love came I could see and hear." The doctor laughed. "St. Anthony making love! How droll!"

Le Corbeau's eyelids narrowed as she answered in pained reproach: "*That*, Jardin, is a thought unworthy . . . even of you."

A wave of colour dyed the doctor's cheek. "Forgive me," he begged, contritely. "I spoke

without thought or courtesy. Forgive me—we will say no more about it. But the wager——"

"There *is* no wager."

"And why?"

"What is done is *done*, . . . but we need not make our shame more pitiful."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I fail to follow."

"Jardin," she answered, with slow impressiveness, "there was once a man who betrayed his Master for thirty pieces of silver, . . . but when his master was taken . . . he cast the money on the floor of the temple, . . . went forth, and hanged himself. . . . You owe me nothing!"

The doctor leaned his cheek upon his hand, in earnest thought.

"Ah, Corbeau," he murmured, "I have wronged you deeply, . . . but I loved more deeply than I wronged. Is it yet too late to repair the evil?"

She nodded sadly. "Yes, Jardin, . . . too late."

"But could you not be happy in my love?" he urged, as he rose and stood beside her. "I know your secret all too well—the Duc de la

Fère, who wrecked your purity and aroused your hatred against my sex—bitter, bitter, but just, perhaps. I, too, am bitter, because I love without the seed of hope; but with you to help me I could be a different man, gentler, kinder, more generous to you and to myself. I seem like a drowning boy who stretches out his arms —for you to save. . . . Help him! . . . or he sinks beneath the surf of his own despair."

"Ah, Jardin," she pleaded, "think—your home—your wife—don't make it harder for me to bear."

"Home!" he repeated slowly. "I *have* no home. To-day my house should be a house of mourning. My wife . . . is dead."

"Dead!" Le Corbeau echoed. "Oh! . . . I'm sorry"—and she rose impulsively and came toward him—"so sorry, my poor Jardin."

The doctor raised his hand. "And I . . . am free! Free to offer you the home which you alone can make—wealth—all the love of my heart and soul, . . . and only ask that you save me from myself."

Le Corbeau answered gently: "Jardin, I do not wish to be unkind, but I have never loved

you. Why pretend it? What cruelty to give myself to you—even as your wife! I could not love you as you would wish, and if I did not, your life would be more bitter still."

"How different you are," he mused, "from the old Corbeau!"

"Yes," she sighed, "the old Corbeau is gone, I trust . . . forever."

The doctor caught his breath. "I think I understand. . . . You love the priest!" She turned away without response. "Answer me!" he cried, and gripped her arm. "The truth!"

She freed herself and looked him squarely in the eye; her tone was calm and without a tremour:

"I love him."

Jardin returned her look in sullen silence; his strong hands clenched, his thin lips stretched across his teeth, inflexible and dry.

"Listen, my friend," Le Corbeau urged, in a saddened tone, "I have never in my life caused aught but sorrow and unhappiness to you—to others—to all who came, unasked or undesired. Still, my nature holds another side which I have hidden, even from myself; and if now I can cast

the evil shell and begin anew, would it not be better—better for us both?"

The doctor sank into his chair, his head drooped forward on his breast.

"I do not know," he muttered hoarsely. "I do not know, . . . for I've eaten of the poppy flower . . . and the drug is in the blood."

"To-morrow," she said, unguardedly, "I am leaving France forever."

The doctor sprang to his feet, with a stifled curse:

"With him? No! *No!*"

"I did not say with him."

"No," he retorted, roughly; "but the truth for once has tripped a falsehood on your tongue."

She passed his brutal speech, with one reproachful glance, and continued gently:

"What I have said may at first seem hard, but some day you will thank me from your heart. If you have done me wrong, 'tis past—forgiven, if you will; and when we say good-bye, I would say it as a friend, leaving no thought behind to cause you bitterness." From her finger she slipped a ring. "Wear this, Jardin, for *my* sake. Look; it is a shield of black with

a single pearl; and when in after days you see it, it may serve to remind you that though Le Corbeau's life was bad . . . there was still one gleam of good." She placed the circlet in his hand. "You will wear it, my friend."

"No!" he cried, in a passionate burst of rage, and flung it fiercely to the floor. "No! You tell me you have changed. A lie! . . . You have wrecked my life, and you glory in it! You have made my nights a torture and my days a curse! I have given you the love of a crawling slave, but you are weary of it! There are still more souls to sap! More! More! I offer you my name—my honour—and you toss me aside like a tattered glove! You give me a ring in memory of the good in you! The good!" He flung out his hands and laughed—laughed bitterly. "The virtues of a serpent!"

"Jardin!"

"And do you think," he snarled, "that I will stand meekly by and see you give a heart that is mine to this whining priest? An amorous apostate—this shaven hypocrite—a traitor to his Church——"

"Jardin—stop!"

"You tell me in that fawning voice of yours that to-morrow you will flee from France with *him!* You will give him a love that is mine! Mine, I tell you! Mine! I say you shall not!"

"You dare——"

"*Shall not!* I will go to the Abbé Sébastian and tell him of the pious work of his Good Samaritan!"

"They would fling you into the street!"

"I will go to the priest himself and tell him what you are!"

"He would not believe you."

"Then, by his God, . . . I'll prove it!"

With a cry Le Corbeau raised her hand. He struck it down; and as though the blow had loosed a Moloch in his blood, he gripped her throat and crushed her in his savage strength across the lounge.

"Jardin!" she gasped. "You're killing me!"

Deeper the tightening fingers sank into her yielding flesh; she fought for breath—for life; one groping hand beat wildly, caught on the hilt of the poniard in his belt, and closed. She struck—struck once—and blindly. He loosed his grip and scuffled to his feet, reeled back-

ward, clutched at the edge of her heavy screen and dragged it with him—lurched—and fell, coughing, to the floor. Le Corbeau stared in wonder from where she lay. He raised himself upon his arm, stretched out his hand in the last, mute declaration of a passion unsubdued, slumped on his side, and forgot the hunger in his heart.

Slowly the woman crawled across the floor; her hand crept, trembling, to the spot where once her head had lain. No answering flutter now! No rise and fall to give the lie to his wide-eyed unresponse!

"*Léon!*" she called, in a choking, sob-torn cry. "*Léon, . . . I have killed him!*"

She knelt beside the stricken man and toyed with his passive fingers, babbling foolishly:

"Jardin, Jardin, you drove me to this thing! *Why* did you do it—*why?* I did not mean to hurt you—no—I knew not what I did. You *will* believe me . . . will you not, Jardin? I could not love you, and you tried to rob me of my Léon. And you *did*, Jardin. I cannot see him now . . . with your blood upon my hands. I'll go, Jardin; but I'll go . . . alone. Léon

will be sorry when I'm gone," she murmured pitifully, "so sorry when I'm gone." She struggled to her feet and set the screen before him to hide his sprawling limbs and the open eyes.

"Good-bye, Jardin, . . . my poor Jardin! . . ."

She paused and peered behind the screen, shuddered, and swiftly crossed the room. Once more she turned and, moving softly, as though she feared the sleeper might awake, blew out her candles, leaving but one to burn, like a silent warder of the dead; then she fled in terror from the hidden thing that seemed to watch her in the dark, and to listen, listen.

CHAPTER XVI

THE candle's flame burned faint and yellow, swayed and flared in the open window's draught; a square of moonlight, shaped by the casement's frame, crept slowly along the floor toward the screen, and Brother Claudien—for he still was clothed in his priestly robe—came softly through the door and stood where the moonbeams fell.

"Adrienne!" he called, and bent his ear to listen. "Adrienne!" No answer came. "'Tis past the time," he muttered, "but, doubtless, she's preparing for the journey—ours!"

For a moment he stood in silent thought; thought for that unknown gate which was opening to his knock; thought for the cares and joys he must leave behind when the portal closed. He loosened the collar of his robe, revealing the doublet of a cavalier beneath.

"In love," he murmured, "we learn . . . to forget"—he took a fold of the cassock in his hand—"and this, too, must be forgotten. . . .



He loosened the collar of his robe, revealing the doublet of a cavalier beneath

But, ah, old friend, my heart is heavy at the parting." He slipped the robe from an arm and shoulder and whispered tenderly, as though the garment were a living thing: "You have covered me in storm and sunshine, shielded me from the cold and heat. . . . You have clung to me in happiness and sorrow, prayers and tears; you have set me apart from other men, and marked me as a man of God. . . . Oh, what a flood of memory comes back to me—the bitter and the sweet! . . . When I leave you with tender reverence—sad—sincere, I step from an old world into a new, . . . the old world filled with prayer and penance, the incense and the grim confessional, where the febrile spark of a few good deeds is smothered in a throng of countless mortal faults, told, sin by sin, on the rosary of time."

He drew the robe from his other arm, but held it lovingly against his breast.

"I leave the old world, so sad and yet so dear, so lonely and yet so peaceful. . . . Farewell, old friend. . . . I've reached the new life's gate—the new life . . . flooded with the glory of a woman's love."

The cassock fell and Léon la Valière stepped over it.

"Adrienne!" he whispered. "Adrienne!"

He lifted his arms like a prisoner set free, then slowly they sank to his sides again. He stooped and raised his vestment from the floor, gently smoothing its rumpled folds, then pressed it to his lips.

"Love asks forgetfulness of all save love alone. . . . But *must* we forget . . . so soon? . . . No! . . . God forbid! . . . I leave you, but your memory shall robe my breast . . . forever!"

He glanced about the room for a hiding-place, and walked slowly toward the screen. "Farewell," he murmured tenderly, and once more raised the cassock to his lips, then placed his hand on that flimsy barrier which stood between his earthly happiness and the sprawling heap behind. "Farew—" He paused and shook his head. "No," he muttered, "'twould tell its story to those who found it there—the robe abandoned—forgotten promises to God—and faith defiled, . . . and I cannot! Cannot!" He turned away. "No! . . . no, dear friend; where *I* may go, there shalt thou go also!"

As he turned, Le Corbeau entered hurriedly, wrapped in a hooded cloak. She crossed the square of moonlight toward the door which led to the street below, when Léon stepped from the shadow of the screen. A stifled scream died, trembling, on her lips, and she shrank before him, white and shivering.

"Adrienne!" he called, as he sprang toward her. "Adrienne, it is I—Léon! Forgive me if I startled you. I thought to find you waiting, and I entered with the key you gave me."

She answered numbly: "The key . . . I gave . . . I . . . don't understand. . . I . . . " And she would have fallen, but Léon caught her in his arms.

"Adrienne!" he cried, "you are ill! What is it?"

"No, no, no,—'tis nothing," she denied. "I'm nervous—I—I——" She started and raised a shaking finger to her lip. "Did you hear—hear nothing?"

"Adrienne, my child, you have overtaxed your strength, I fear. Come, . . . sit here and rest." He led her to the lounge and poured a glass of wine. "Drink this," he coaxed, "'twill

strengthen you. . . . There . . . that's better! Is it not good?"

"Yes . . . good . . . thank you," she replied in a halting murmur, then irritably: "What is that ugly thing?"

"Where, dear one?"

"There! There! You hold it on your arm! *What* is the thing?"

"This?" he asked, as he raised his folded cassock. "It is the robe, Adrienne—the robe which I have laid aside for you . . . forever."

"For me? Forever?" she repeated, miserably, then hid her face and sobbed: "Oh, Léon, Léon, why did you come back—why—why——"

"To take you with me, Adrienne; but don't talk now, it only excites and distresses you. Try to rest a while, and soon you will be better. See what a gentle nurse I'll learn to be." He seated himself beside her on the lounge. "Your head on my shoulder—so. My arm about you to protect and comfort; a hand to smooth your brow—how hot it is, poor child; you have a fever. This, too, will pass with rest and quiet."

She leaned on his breast, with eyelids closed,

and strove to forget the hidden horror, in the wondrous tenderness of Léon's love. Again he spoke, in his gentle, soothing tones, and she nestled closer in the fortress of his arms.

"How sweet it is to sit beside you, . . . to comfort you and love you; to run my fingers lightly through your hair—and 'tis so beautiful, Adrienne—to know that you are mine, all mine, forever and a day." He bent his head, and her dark locks stirred beneath his kiss. "See how the moonlight streams into your window, . . . coming like a fairy goddess to tell us of our happiness. I could sit contented for hours so, . . . reading our destiny in the threads of silver moonlight that weave a story of love and peace. . . . How clear and beautiful is the story written there. . . . I see the long gray road that leads from Paris—the twinkling lights of a thousand dwarfish cottages that dot the country-side. . . . I hear the beat of the horses' hoofs timing the music of our hearts. Ah, what a song of happiness the hoof-beats sing—bearing us two away from the solemn city—away under the stars, each one a tiny torch of love that seems to smile and beckon us. Away!

Away to the land where the moonlight ends and the dawn of love's fair day is breaking."

"Léon! Léon!" she murmured softly, and stroked his cheek with a trembling hand. 'Twas sweet to hear his voice, in words which seemed to ease the torment in her heart; but other ears were listening, listening, and she glanced affrightedly toward the screen. Léon spoke again:

"On, on, dear Adrienne, till we reach at last the land where joy and peace shall blossom as the rose, . . . 'where death comes not, nor parting, and no tears.'"

"My Léon!"

"My love!" he whispered, reverently, and raised his head. "See! The moon has gone behind a cloud, casting a shadow on the floor. . . . Some little shadows must ever come to us, but will only serve to make our lives the brighter when they pass."

"Ah, Léon," she answered, nervously, and her eyes grew big with fear, "there is a shadow greater than you know—so deep—so dark—so pitiless. It oppresses me! It smothers me!"

Léon smiled. "I do not fear it, little one, with you to love. Look! Your cloud is passing even now, and the light once more comes streaming through the window. Is it not beautiful, Adrienne?"

"No, no, no," she excitedly protested; "it frightens me! . . . even more than the clouds."

"Nonsense!" he laughed, and pinched her cheek. "But see how it creeps—so slowly—inch by inch, as if some phantom hand were reaching stealthily toward——"

"Léon! Léon! What are you saying?" she cried out nervously, and stared at the light, in shivering dread.

"Nothing, dear heart; 'tis only the light of love which seems to smile for us. And see . . . it has reached your screen." Le Corbeau gasped. "It creeps and creeps, as though it would look behind for something hidden there." She clung to him in shuddering agony, but he could not see her face. "Look! Look!" he cried, "'twill soon envelop it in a flood of—A—h!"

The white moon burst through a wind-torn cloud and smeared the screen with her pallid

glory. Le Corbeau screamed and leaped, in frenzied horror, from the lounge.

"Adrienne! What is it?" Léon cried, and took her in his arms.

She fought him for release. "Let me go!" she shrilled. "Oh, let me go! I *can't* stay here! God! . . . I'm going mad!"

"Child, child," he questioned, nervously, "what frightens you? Tell me. *I* am here to shield you, dear one."

He strove to soothe her, but she shrank from his embrace, entreating piteously: "Let me go! Only let me leave this room! It stifles me! It chokes me! Léon, . . . let me go!"

"Then come," he urged, and led her gently; "a carriage waits below to take us to the city wall where the horses wait. The cool, fresh air will soon revive you. Come."

She drew back, trembling. "No, no, no! I can't! I can't!"

"Cannot?" he questioned, wonderingly.

"No! . . . No! Never! Never! Oh, Léon, go back to your brotherhood and forget that I ever lived. . . . Don't ask me why—don't try to find me . . . only go! Go! Go!"

He was silent for a moment, studying her in grieved surprise.

"Do you—do you wish it, Adrienne?"

"I—I wish it," she answered, haltingly, and turned her eyes away.

When Léon spoke again, his words came slowly, while the man was struggling in the grip of a growing fear:

"You have said you were not ill, . . . and yet you wish that I should leave you—now—and for all. Am *I* the cause? Is it—is it that you . . . so soon . . . have ceased to care for me? . . . Can this be true? . . . Answer me!"

"*Dieu!* Can I tell him that?" she asked herself, then raised her eyes to his and faltered, coldly: "I do not love you—I—I have *never* loved you. . . . Go back to your House of Peace—forget—it is all wrong—confused—and——"

She stopped; her breaking heart could lie no more; she sank in a huddled heap, her arms outstretched across the lounge, and sobbed in the pain of her sacrifice.

Léon looked down upon her in numb despair. "I think . . . I understand," he said. "Woman,

woman, what have you done? . . . You, whom I loved with all my life and soul—better than Heaven itself,—and it is a lie! You, for whom I sacrificed my sacred pledge to God . . . and this . . . is the end!"

"Léon," she sobbed, "if you only knew."

"And this is the end," he repeated dully, turned on his heel, and walked away.

"Léon! Léon! Come back!" she called. "I cannot be left alone!" She rose and looked at the screen in terror. "I *dare* not! . . . *Léon!*"

He paused, in pain and doubt, and returned reluctantly. She sought to put her arms about his neck, but he stayed her with a firm, restraining hand. She caught the hand and held it in both her own, murmuring, brokenly:

"I love you, Léon—love you enough to bear the bruise of parting . . . for your sake. 'Twas all for you, dear—no selfish thought——"

"Then tell me what you mean," he said. "If you are ill——"

"No, no; I am not ill. I'll tell you—everything, . . . only . . . don't leave me, Léon, . . . don't leave me—here—this place. . . . Forgive

me, if you can. . . . I tried so hard—and—and I loved you so."

Léon watched her, silently, a question in his eyes, as she fought with fear and hesitation:

"I—I—Léon, you seem so strange. Put on your robe again, and then, perhaps, 'twill make it easier . . . to tell." She seated herself upon the lounge and twisted its coverlet in her nervous hands. "Léon, . . . I'll keep back nothing—nothing—I— Shut the window! . . . The moonlight—it terrifies me!"

He crossed and drew her curtains closely, returned and lit the candles in a bracket on the wall.

"Put on your robe," she pleaded, "for *my* sake, Léon—will you?"

In silence he hid the cavalier beneath the cassock's folds, and wound the mantle about his shoulders, then stood before her—once again a priest.

"There, 'tis done," he said. He seated himself beside her and took her hand. "Now, tell me, Adrienne."

"Léon . . . " Her voice was hard and strained.

"Yes? . . . I'm listening."

"Léon . . . I have deceived you."

"Deceived me?"

"Yes. I'm not what you think me—I'm not Adrienne——"

"Not Adrienne!" he gasped. "Then who ——?"

"I cannot tell you. Don't ask me. That I love you with all my life and soul is true; but the rest—but the rest— Oh, have pity on me——"

"You are not yourself!" he exclaimed. "You know not what you say!"

"I tell you," she answered, in the same hard tone, "I tell you it is true. I was a woman of the world—heartless—bitter—living a life of evil recklessness——"

"A—h!"

"—a woman who feared neither man nor devil —who sought for happiness in sin and forgetfulness in wine."

"*God!*"

"I won your love because of a wager—I——"

He sprang to his feet. "And you dare to tell me this!" he cried. "*You!*"

She cowered beneath the fierceness of his mien, as though she feared his lifted hand would strike.

"But, Léon," she wailed, "he drove me to it. . . . He forced me with all his cunning wickedness. I was a weak, weak woman—vain—thoughtless——"

"Oh, how pitiful!" he breathed, in scorn. "How pitiful!"

"Listen, Léon——"

His pale lips curled in harsh contempt. "And so you won the love of a simple priest . . . *for money!*"

"No, no," she cried, "the money I refused. . . . I won you, it is true; but because I loved you. It changed my life—my nature. . . . I wanted to be good. . . . I wanted to be worthy of you. I thought we could leave it all behind in Paris and forget. 'Twas not the wager, Léon, but because I loved you."

"Loved me!" he laughed, in bitterness. "Loved me! And you ask me to believe *this!* This tangle of treacherous deceit? No, no, I cannot! Cannot!" And he dropped into a seat and bowed his head upon his hands.

Again Le Corbeau spoke, but fearfully: "Léon, I speak the truth. I thought with you to love I could expurgate the past, . . . and bury it with your broken vows . . . and Fabien." She sank on her knees beside him. "And I'd love you, oh, so tenderly, so deeply and so long. I'd be your slave—your drudge—" He shook his head. "But take away your love," she moaned, "and I'm lost—body, mind, and soul!"

She placed a timid hand upon his shoulder, but he shrank beneath her touch.

"Léon," she pleaded, "did you not tell me once what your dear old abbé taught, . . . that if, in your lives of toil and penance, a brother's pledge to Heaven seemed fruitless and unavailing, still, if he saved one single soul, he spent not his life in vain?"

He lifted his head, and she called to him from the depth of her yearning love: "Léon, . . . save me—save me!"

He did not speak, but his hand sought hers, and found it. Nearer she crept, and nearer still. Her Circean arm stole gently round his neck, and she held him with her eyes, those haunting

eyes which had broken stronger wills, which glowed with passion, swam in repentant tears, and begged for pity—pity alone, where a man might give his blood.

"My love . . . my love," she moaned, "in your kingly heart you find forgiveness . . . even for Corbeau?"

"Corbeau?" he mumbled, stupidly, and stared in vacant wonderment. "Corbeau?"

"Yes, Léon, I am she—Corbeau."

"You! . . . Great God!"

He started to his feet and pushed her from him roughly; he did not even look to see her fall, but stood bewildered, muttering, in dull monotony: "Corbeau, the queen of sin! . . . Corbeau, the wanton!"

"Forgive—forgive——" she cried.

At the sound of her voice he turned and answered, harshly: "No! A woman who had fallen—her—I might forgive But she, the queen of sin—Corbeau! No, no, it cannot be, it cannot be!"

"Léon!"

Again he turned upon her, in scorn and bitterness: "Oh, it is shameless! You crept into

my sister's home—the creature that you are; sullied her cheek with your kisses—the foulest lie in each caress! You wrecked my life . . . for money! . . . *Pah!* . . . Well, . . . 'tis done . . . well done! . . . You have won your wager!"

He turned on his heel and would have left her where she lay, but she rose to her knees and gripped his robe, in the fierceness of her misery.

"Léon . . . forgive me! Listen! How can you turn away? Don't think of what I've been, but of what I am!"

"The queen of sin," he muttered, heavily. "For money!"

He put out his hand to loose her hold upon his skirt, but she clung in desperation.

"Father!" she cried. "Will you deny me that which you give the meanest beggar in the street? . . . Pity! . . . Pity! . . . *You* are a priest of God . . . and I a woman in despair! . . . Pity! . . . Pity!"

"The queen of sin," he muttered still; "Corbeau . . . the wanton!"

"Father," she sobbed, "you said forgiveness

was the choicest gem in the crown of God, . . . and your heart is hard . . . and cold . . . and cruel."

He rested his gaze on the trembling wretch, whose words seemed strange and void of meaning; his eyes were wide and lustreless, fixed in stunned bewilderment, while his brain refused to grip the tumbling thoughts which racked him with a nameless pain.

To the woman a something in that silent stare seemed terrible and fraught with compelling power—a something that crushed her will and dragged her secret from protesting lips.

"Léon," she cried, "don't look at me so! You frighten me! . . . take your eyes away! . . . I cannot tell you any more! . . . There's nothing more to tell! . . . I've told you all! . . . Don't look at me like that! . . . Léon! . . . you will force it from me . . . and I wished to spare you! . . . Take away your eyes! . . . I can't tell you, Léon! I can't! I can't! I can't!" She loosened her hold upon his robe and looked at the screen in ghastly terror, shrinking away and whispering: "He's cold . . . and white . . . and still. . . . He's staring

at us, Léon . . . listening . . . listening . . . listening . . . "

She crouched, in chattering fear, one shaking finger pointed at the hidden thing, till the priest, aroused from his lethargy, followed her gaze, then strode toward the screen.

"No, Léon! No! Not that!" she cried. "Not that! Come back! Come back! Mother! . . . Have mercy—mercy——"

With a sweep of his arm he struck the barrier down—saw—and sprang back, aghast and trembling.

CHAPTER XVII

An ivy vine clung to the aging walls of The House of Peace. It clambered upward on the rough-hewn masonry, seeking new footholds in the ever-widening crevices from which the rotting mortar fell; and when it had scaled the parapet and spread along the grey stone cóping, worn smooth by countless rains, it sent its green young tendrils creeping in a downward course, as if seeking to penetrate the mysteries of the dim-lit cloister. A sturdy vine, as sturdy as the long-forgotten priest who planted it; and, as though to keep his memory green, it carried out a work of mercy which had set God's seal upon an humble toiler in the vineyard; for here the thick, dark foliage gave shelter to the sparrows, even as The House of Peace was a shelter for men and the children of men who knocked and were not denied. The clinging vine remembers; 'tis the sparrow that forgets.

All day long these tiny pensioners on a curé's bounty chirped and twittered in the sunshine,

fluttered noisily among the rustling leaves, or gossiped on the follies of their neighbours that dwelt in other vines. Here were played out the little romances of their lives, their loves and sorrows; here their never-ending broods were hatched and foisted on the charity of the calm-faced priests who pattered silently among the shifting shadows—who hugged their sorrows and strove to forget their loves.

Sometimes a drooping sparrow fell from his swaying perch and lay gasping on the ground; it huddled for warmth against the cloister wall, and died alone. Its fellows paused for a moment in their twittering, then twittered louder still. The bird is dead! Why trouble over it? The curé is also dead; his bones long crumbled into dust. Sunshine was made for singing, not for tears, . . . and a bird or a priest the less—what matters it? Twitter . . . and forget!

In his narrow cell the Good Samaritan lay tossing, half delirious, on his rumpled couch. Beside him stood his food, untasted, and an empty water jug. Two bright-eyed sparrows hopped on the window ledge, peeped in, and marvelled at the moaning priest who fed them

not; and Claudien's brothers shook their heads and whispered as they pattered past his door.

In a dingy room above the shop of Madame Denise a woman hid from those who sought her throughout the city; she trembled at each unwonted sound, and cowered in shivering dread as the seekers clattered by in the street below. At her side sat Raymond, the one among all her friends on whom she could lean in the hour of need; and, womanlike, she leaned.

In Le Corbeau's home three lean *gendarmes* awaited the Poppy Flower's chance return; and, to ease the dull monotony, threw dice, laughing aloud when luck ran high, or cursing at an evil cast. Before the house stood a crowd of idlers, beggars—fools—who stared at the tight-closed blinds, in expectant awe. The law was seeking. The murderess? Pooh! They would find her in a day or two. Meanwhile, her loose-tongued friends poured out her story, like uncorked bottles turned upside down.

The house of Jardin was a house of mourning, for the master lay dead in an upper room. A starving terrier whined—whined pitifully—and scratched with a bandaged paw at the door

which shut him in the street. What knew these foolish men who had driven him away, what knew they of the master's love and tenderness? What knew they of his splendid heart, crushed down by hopeless passion to the dust of bitterness? There were none, in life, to bathe the master's wounds; none to whisper words of comfort in his pain. Yes . . . there was one—a homeless little dog—that had understood—had loved—and licked his hand.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE sparrows twittered, and the mid-day sunlight fell upon The House of Peace. The cloister garden lay moist and cool in the drowsy silence, its high walls casting shadows on the grass, shielding the shrubs and flowers, and shutting from the dusty road outside all but the fragrance of the guarded spot. The building itself, of solid masonry, was erected for stern stability rather than beauty of design. On the side which faced the garden stretched a long, arched portico, making a shaded promenade, along which the brothers were wont to pace in meditation. At the northern end a stairway led to a pillared gallery above, and overlooked the garden and the country beyond the Seine; behind the pillars peeped eyelike the windows of cells, whence a listener's keen ear might catch the murmured fragment of a prayer and the low, faint click of beads on a fingered rosary. A gravelled pathway led to the gate which pierced the wall, and above the gate stood a

massive lamp, fashioned by some brother of the past, in the form of an iron cross. To the left, half buried in creeping vines, stood a little latticed house wherein were kept the garden tools and the seeds of flowers. On the right a thick-leafed shade-tree grew, and beneath its protecting boughs sat Abbé Sébastian, engaged in writing at a rough, square table.

The abbé was a man who ruled his house with a rod of love, and gained in return—from the oldest brother to the humblest acolyte—unquestioning obedience and the trust which a child gives. A fringe of snow-white hair crept out beneath his black biretta, and his kind old face was lined with poignant grief as he bent to the labour of his halting quill.

Philippe, a lean and sallow priest, descended the stairway, bearing in his arms a covered tray.

"Philippe!" the abbé called, and the priest came forward, setting the tray on a vacant chair beside the table.

"Yes, father?"

"Has he eaten?"

Philippe, in answer, lifted the cloth and shook his head: "No morsel has passed his lips. I

placed the tray before him with a crock of water; the water he drinks in eagerness, but the food remains untouched."

"Poor Claudien!" the abbé sighed. "And you watched last night, Philippe?"

"The whole night long I sat outside his door, my vigil ending with the call to matins."

"Did he sleep?"

"Little. At daybreak there was silence in his cell, but till then I heard his footsteps almost ceaselessly."

"And prayers, Philippe—you heard him at his prayers?" the abbé questioned, anxiously, but Philippe was silent. "Speak!"

The answer came in hesitation. "I heard him once—once only—a passionate petition to Heaven for help and guidance. . . . A prayer which wrung my soul with its fierce despair . . . more bitter than a sinner's dying cry . . . and then at length he moaned: 'O God, I mock Thee! . . . Adrienne! . . . My Adrienne!' . . . and I placed my palms upon my ears."

Sébastian bowed his head, in sorrowing silence, and after a pause he asked:

"And then, Philippe?"

"And then he flung himself upon his couch and sobbed—great sobs that shook him till his heart was like to burst. Ah, father, 'tis a fearsome thing to listen to a strong man weeping."

"No more, Philippe!" the abbé cried. "My heart is sick within me."

A moment Philippe stood silently, then lifting the tray, he passed into the cloister, while Sébastian, with a heavy sigh, returned to the work before him. As Philippe once more came out upon the portico a carriage stopped in the road outside and a knock was heard at the garden gate. He took a key from its hook upon the wall and unlocked the oaken door. A woman stood in the opening and begged a word with the abbé of The House of Peace; and when she gave her name, Philippe returned to his superior and whispered, eagerly:

"'Tis Claudien's sister—the Duchesse de la Fère."

Sébastian laid down his pen, and arose. "You may bid her enter."

Cécile came forward impulsively. "Father!" The abbé took her hands in his.

"You are Claudien's sister?"

"Yes; I am Cécile. . . . Oh, father, I have come to you, for I knew not where else to turn. My brother! . . . He is here?"

"Yes, my child."

"Take me to him," the duchesse begged, but Sébastian restrained her gently.

"Not now, Cécile," and he pointed to the cloister. "He is there in his room, and a woman may not enter—even the sister of a priest. Besides, it is best, for the present, that he sees no one."

He led her to a seat.

"But, father," she asked, "it is not true, the dreadful things they say of him! They are false and cruel!" The abbé looked at the ground in silence. "Answer me, father—say they are not true!"

"I know not, Cécile," he returned, in sadness; "I know not. I strive to believe him blameless, but he will not speak. Even to me he is silent—even to me."

"But he could not have loved this—this woman!" she exclaimed. "Could Léon break his vows for *her*—could Léon——"

"Ah, my child," the abbé answered, "there is

many a sparrow fallen from its nest when the wind has blown too roughly, and many a lamb has strayed from the fold when the shepherd slept."

"And you condemn him, too?" she asked, reproachfully. "Oh, if you knew how sorely he was tried! If you knew how she entered my home—deceived and tempted him; how she sought with her every art to lure him from the path of duty—appealing to his tenderness of nature—his generous love for the helpless and distressed."

"I know, poor child, I know," Sébastian murmured.

"And then to find that she whom we had sheltered and caressed—she whom we had thought so pure—was one of whom good women speak in whispers—the courtesan—Corbeau!" The abbé nodded pityingly. "And when Léon learned what the creature was, he must have turned from her in just contempt—aye, in contempt and loathing. . . . But tell me, father, what you know of him. . . . Spare nothing, for I'll bear it bravely, in my love for Léon."

"Alas!" Sébastian sighed, "there is little I

may say with certainty. Two nights ago, at midnight, I was summoned to the garden gate on an urgent call. In haste I clothed myself and came. . . . 'Twas Claudien, and he would not enter. His face was white and drawn with suffering; his hands were cold and trembling. He had come to say farewell to me. . . . He had striven, he said, and failed—had broken his vows and dishonoured the robe which covered him. His soul had sinned—God's curse was on him—and his heart was shamed and breaking."

"Ah, poor boy!" the duchesse murmured, tearfully. The abbé paused, and then went on again:

"I thought him ill, and strove to lead him through the gate; but he beat his palms together, crying out, in agony, that The House of Peace could shelter him no more."

"Oh, 'tis pitiful—pitiful!" sobbed Cécile.

"I sought to soothe him, entreating him to tell me what had happened—but no! . . . He begged me to question him no further, for his day was done—the light gone out forever, and he only longed to die and be forgotten. . . . At length he stooped, pressed the hem of my robe

to his lips, and turned away in the darkness. . . . He stumbled—and fell, unconscious, to the ground."

A cry of pain escaped Cécile, and she bowed her head and wept, while down the abbé's cheeks rolled the tears of as deep a love and grief as hers.

"We lifted him," he said, "and bore him tenderly to his cell, where since he has remained, in silence and woe unutterable."

"Father," Cécile returned, "he has suffered more than we will ever know. But tell me—since Léon will speak no word against the woman—how did you learn of the pit she dug for him?"

Sébastian shook his head. "There is much that is still in mystery. When it was learned through a frightened maid that a man lay dead in the house of the woman called Le Corbeau, a rigid search was instigated. The woman has disappeared, but those who had been her friends were questioned, and the truth was brought to light. I would have kept it secret for your brother's sake, but rumour linked her name with his; the damning story flew from lip to lip, until

those who loved him yesterday speak only evil of the Good Samaritan."

"But it is not true!" the duchesse cried. "It can't be true!"

The abbé spoke in bitterness: "Those whose dying children he had nursed, those whose homes were lighted by the watcher's toil, whose griefs were borne, whose very bread was given, they—they forget his gentle ministrations and smirch his name with crime!"

"And they dare say that?" the duchesse cried, as she rose to her feet excitedly. "They dare to say that Léon killed . . . Jardin? . . . Tell me, father! Don't try to hide it from me! Can they breathe such things of him?"

Sébastian nodded sadly. "They say even that, . . . Cécile."

"Oh, 'tis wicked—monstrous!" she angrily declared, then turned in sudden fear: "Father! . . . then Léon will be taken! They will throw him into prison! Léon! No, no . . . they would not take a priest?"

"Cécile," the abbé answered gently, "I will not deceive you, for 'twould be a cruel kindness. Even now the officers of the king are hunting

Le Corbeau, and soon, I fear, they will also seek for Claudien—in The House of Peace."

"But, father, he is innocent! Surely you will save him?"

"What lies within my power I will do," said Sébastian, solemnly. "I have loved him with all the tenderness of an old man's heart, . . . watched over him, . . . prayed with him, . . . have striven to guide him, as though he had been my only son."

"And—and he loved you, father," the duchesse faltered.

"And forgot it for a woman," muttered the abbé, half aloud.

"Will you, too, turn against him—*you!*"

He faced her, this grey old man of seventy years, and answered, with a tremour in his tone:

"No! . . . No, Cécile. A something tells me that, though he may have erred, still he is free from guilt. In silence he bears another's sin upon his shoulders, and shields the woman who has wrought his ruin. . . . Pride! That stubborn blood of fearless manhood in his veins, which takes no road to freedom while a fellow-creature suffers in his stead."

The duchesse bent impulsively and kissed Sébastian's hand.

"Ah, father . . . you love him still!"

"Love him?" the abbé echoed, tenderly, as he lifted his eyes to the cloudless sky. "Oh, that I might give my poor old life for his—for his!"

For a moment neither spoke, then the duchesse questioned, timidly: "Has—has nothing been done to—to save him?"

"All that *can* be done," the father answered. "His brothers defend him loyally, hoping against hope; but Claudien will speak no word to guide us, and we can only trust and wait." He lifted a written paper from his table. "I have here prepared a letter to the cardinal, setting forth our brother's deeds of noble sacrifice—his labours for the poor, his earnest zeal, till now, in the cause of Christ; and I beg his eminence to intercede for clemency with the king, at least, till the truth is known."

He held the missive in his hand and pondered deeply.

"Give *me* the letter, father," begged Cécile. "I myself will take it. I will plead on my

knees for Léon to the cardinal and the king, . . . and the king will listen, for he loves the duc, my husband." The abbé weighed Cécile's request, in hesitation, but she urged him at his weakest point. "Give me the packet, father, for Léon's sake."

"Take it, my child, and God will aid you in your task." He placed the letter in her hands and rose. "But hasten, for there's little time to lose."

"A sister's love," she cried, "will lend me wings, and Léon may yet be saved."

She crossed to the gate, and Sébastian followed her.

"And when I return," she asked, "then, father, I may see him?"

"Yes, Cécile, you shall speak with Léon then. . . . Yes."

She knelt for his blessing, then passed through the gate in silence, and the grey old man stood watching till her carriage disappeared in a cloud of whirling dust.

CHAPTER XIX

As Abbé Sébastian was about to close the gate, a black-robed priest, who had walked along the road, accosted him:

"Greeting, holy father; I bear a missive from his eminence the cardinal."

"Greeting, my son," returned Sébastian, as he took the letter in his hand. "But will you not enter and rest beneath the shade while I break the seal?"

"It needs no answer," said the priest. "Peace be with you, holy father." He bowed, stepped out on the sunlit road, and passed from view.

Philippe came forward and closed the gate, while Sébastian crossed to his table beneath the tree and scanned the cardinal's letter, perusing its contents with a deepening frown. He sighed when he had finished, folded, and laid it down, and sat in profound perplexity.

"Ill tidings, father?" asked Philippe.

"Ill tidings . . . yes." The abbé tapped the letter in impatience. "A missive from the car-

dinal, in which I am informed that he will send a deputy to question Claudien—his friend and councillor—Castine."

"Castine . . . the Jesuit?"

Sébastian nodded. "The same. A worthy man and a zealous churchman: high in favour with the king, but harsh, incisive, soured by long ill-health; and if Claudien answers not his questionings, the Jesuit's anger may be deeply stirred."

"And Claudien's cause will fare but sadly," said Philippe.

"I fear it, Philippe, I fear it," Sébastian answered, with a shaking head. "But Claudien must be prepared. I will make one last appeal in the name of the love I bear him."

Sébastian rose and walked slowly toward the steps which led to the gallery and the upper cells, when a knock was heard at the garden gate; he paused as Philippe unlocked it, and saw in the opening the figure of a woman. In a moment more Philippe had crossed to him.

"'Tis one," he said, "who begs a word with you in private."

"Who is she?"

"I know not; she is closely veiled, and will give no name."

"Tell her to come to-morrow," the abbé answered; "to-day I am pressed with weighty matters which may not be delayed. To-morrow, Philippe—to-morrow."

The lean priest turned to bear the message to the woman at the gate, while Sébastian began a slow ascent of the steep stone stairs, but Philippe once more had followed and detained him.

"Father, she says her case is gravely urgent, can be told to you alone, and she seems in deep distress."

"Distress!" the abbé echoed. "How full of it is this poor old world! A sun that rises in sorrow and sets in tears. . . . She may enter, Philippe."

Descending the stair, he crossed to his table beneath the shade and waited as the woman advanced toward him.

"I thank you, father," she said, in a faltering voice, "but—but may I speak with you alone?"

Sébastian waved his hand, and Philippe retired to an oaken bench beside the gate. The

abbé then drew a chair for her and seated himself beside his table.

"We are now alone, madame," he said, in kindly tones; "but I must ask you to be brief, for there are many matters which tax my time, and it grows already late."

The woman answered nervously: "I wanted to see you—to tell you—and yet—and yet I feared——"

"And what had you to fear . . . from me?"

"Your anger, father."

Sébastian shook his head. "No, no," he hastened to assure her; "you mislead yourself. It is my office to comfort those in sorrow, and bring them back once more to happiness and peace. What troubles you, my child?"

"Ah, father," she returned, as she clasped her hands to check their trembling, "you have such a dear, kind face—so gentle—tender—and still I fear—I fear your curse."

"I curse no one, poor heart."

"'Tis true, perhaps, for others," she answered sadly, "but not for me—not for . . . Le Corbeau."

"Le Corbeau!"

The abbé started, and Philippe, who had caught the name, bent forward, listening eagerly.

The woman drew aside her veil. "Yes," she said, "*I* am . . . Le Corbeau."

Sébastian rose and paced the gravel path excitedly. In spite of himself, his anger stirred till his vesture rose and fell upon his breast to the pulse of his deep emotion, and when he spoke he muttered half aloud, unconscious of the pain he gave to her who listened:

"Corbeau! . . . The harlot! . . . She who has stolen the soul of my son and dragged it in the slough of her pitiless desire——"

"Father!"

"—she for whom he forgets his God! . . . She for whom he has wandered away from the poor old heart that loved him—mine—*mine*—that loved him. Woman," he demanded, "have you, then, no shame?"

"Father," she cried, appealingly, "I'm in distress!"

He turned upon her harshly. "There's *no* distress . . . without a heart to bear it, . . . and *you* have none!" He struggled to subdue his anger. "Why have you come to *me?*"

"To plead forgiveness."

"Heaven alone can grant forgiveness. I am but a servant of the Master."

"And I . . . a woman who has sinned . . . and repented."

Sébastian paused, the look of anger slowly fading from his face.

"Speak . . . " he answered, gently, as he sank into his seat and rested his cheek upon his hand. "Speak, my child; I am listening."

"I have come to you," she said, "for Léon's sake alone. Has he told you of me, father—of —of how I tempted him?"

"He has uttered no word concerning you, but suffers in silence for his own disgrace, and bows beneath the burden of a double sin."

"No, father, no," Le Corbeau disavowed. "The sin is mine, not his. His robe is spotless, save for the love he gave me—a love as pure as his proud and noble heart."

Sébastian raised his eyes and murmured, chokingly: "O God . . . I thank Thee!" He bowed his head in a silent prayer of thankfulness, then turned to the woman kindly. "Go on. I listen. Tell me."

"Father," she replied, "I will tell you the pitiful story from first to last. You know the name which Paris calls me—Le Corbeau. Alas! my history goes with it; we need not dwell on that. In a moment of unreasoning folly I made a wager with Monsieur Jardin——"

"The man who is dead?" Sébastian asked. "You killed——"

Le Corbeau bowed her head in mute assent.

"May God forgive you," the abbé whispered, and a silence fell between them.

Then Le Corbeau told her story, from its black beginning to its blacker end, withholding nothing of the evil she had done; but the abbé read far deeper than she told, and his heart was stirred with a great and human pity for the outcast and her fall. She told of Jardin and his blistering scorn which drove her to crawl like a serpent in the home of Léon's sister; of the shame that crept upon her in the stillness of the night, and the longing to be good and pure, even as Claudien, the Good Samaritan. And with repentance grew a wondrous love for him who had lifted her—a love which mocked unworthiness and plunged her sinning heart in

misery. She told how she would have left that home of purity, but love crushed down her wavering will, and she broke his rosary—then hunted on her knees till the last bead was found. She told of Jardin again, of how he would have dragged her back into the mire of wickedness, and then, in the madness of his passion, sought to take her life; she loosened her gown and showed the purple bruises of his fingers on her throat.

"Father," she cried, "I knew not what I did! I was crazed with terror, and I struck! I did not mean to kill! . . . Father, before the Virgin, I did not mean to kill!"

She told how she had placed a screen before the stricken man, for his eyes were open and seemed to follow everywhere, and then she had hastened to fly from the hidden thing, and from Léon, whom now she must see no more. Then came the story of the priest's return, when she might have fled with him and have left no trace behind; but she begged him to leave her there and go back again to his brotherhood.

"And, father," Le Corbeau sobbed, "he would not go; I even told him I had never loved him,

though I wellnigh strangled at the lie. And when he would have turned away in anger, then, in my love and my woman's weakness—in my fear of the still, white thing with its open eyes—then—then I called him back and told him all. Told how I had striven to be worthy of his love . . . and how I failed—named the vile thing I was—the leper who was crushed with her own despair—whose smallest crime was loving him too well. And on my knees I begged for pity—only pity—and Léon turned from me, father, . . . and left me—with the dead."

Sébastian hid his face within his hands, and a tear of deep compassion fell between his trembling fingers.

"Father, I have told the truth. . . . If lips like mine did not profane, I'd swear it on your crucifix."

The abbé arose and placed a gentle hand upon her head. "Poor child," he murmured tenderly, "God gives you pity where Claudien could not give—gives more than pity to those who kneel in penitence and ask."

"And now," she answered, with a tearful smile, "when all is done, I beg you take him

back once more into The House of Peace; and beneath the shadow of his priestly robe . . . your Claudien may forget."

"And you?" the abbé asked.

"I? . . . What matters it? I will go to the cardinal and to the king to plead his cause . . . to bear imprisonment—death if need be—for Léon's sake. . . . I will go alone."

Sébastian straightened; his eyes grew bright, and his low voice shook with the pathos of his tone:

"No, *not* alone, . . . for *I* go with you."

"Father!"

Le Corbeau fell upon her knees and hid her face in the folds of the abbé's robe.

He raised her gently. "Bear up, brave heart, the end is not yet come. You have striven to mend an evil for which you are not alone to blame, and Heaven will stretch to you a helping hand. Come to me at sunset and together we will seek the king. Go now, and peace be with you."

Le Corbeau lingered still; she turned to the abbé timidly:

"Father——"

"Yes?"

"To-day I pass from Léon's life forever. . . . I shall never see his face again. . . . I—I may speak with him before I go?"

Sébastian sadly shook his head. "No. . . . 'Tis better as it is."

"Only a word, dear father—a touch of his hand. So little to ask, and to me it means—Ah, father, I've tried so hard for him."

Sébastian answered kindly, but his tone was firm: "My child, it grieves me sorely to refuse, yet it is impossible. . . . Urge me no more, I pray you."

But she would not be denied. "Forgive me," she begged, in humble prayer. "Could I but *see* him? I only ask one look. I will be silent, and he'll never know. Father, . . . you will let me see him—a last faint gleam of light to a heart made desolate? And 'tis breaking, father, for the bitter loneliness . . . that will be mine."

The old man's eyes grew dim with a mist of tears, and his voice was tremulous as he made reply:

"Listen, my child; you deem me stern and harsh—unmindful of your suffering and sacrifice.

You were free to go, and yet you came for Claudien's sake, . . . and for him you will suffer further still. Your heart is brave, and you shall not be forgotten. Come to me when the sun is set and we'll pray the king for mercy, . . . the king and the King of kings. Peace be with you, and farewell."

Le Corbeau knelt at the father's feet, and he stretched out his hands in blessing; she kissed his robe, then crossed with a drooping step toward the gate; but when she was almost beneath the iron lamp she stopped, sprang back with a cry of fear, and pointed down the road. Sébastian, hastening to her side, looked, and was filled with consternation, for under a tree a hundred yards away a mounted *gendarme* sat his horse and fixed his gaze on The House of Peace, so that none who entered or withdrew might escape his lynx-eyed vigilance.

The abbé gazed in deep perplexity, for well he knew that should the *gendarme* take the woman prisoner her chance of pardon by the king was small indeed; and somewhere in his priestly veins a warlike drop of blood surged to his sturdy heart and warmed it. He clenched

his soft white fist, and registered a vow that ere they took this friendless child who sacrificed herself for love of Claudien, the walls of The House of Peace should first be battered down; then he closed the gate and turned to Le Corbeau kindly.

"My daughter," he said, "yon watching officer has altered somewhat of my plans, and while he waits I cannot jeopardize your safety by dismissing you. A matter of weighty import demands my absence for a time, and I therefore beg that you remain till my return." He cast about him for a spot wherein she might escape inquiring eyes, then led her to the latticed toolhouse near the wall. "Here," he said, "you may rest in calm security, first giving me your faithful pledge to speak with no one, nor make attempt to leave your hiding place."

"I promise, father," she answered gratefully, and crossed the threshold of her snug retreat, where, through the latticed bars, she could see and hear all that passed in the cloister garden.

Sébastian closed the door, thought for a moment, then turned the key, and placed it in a

fold of his inner robe. When this was done he crossed to his table hastily and began to write. He sprinkled the sheet with sand, and called Philippe, as he folded and sealed the missive:

"Philippe, you have heard?"

"Aye," replied his attendant priest, "aye, father, and God be praised!"

Sébastian handed him the letter and spoke in guarded tones:

"Take this missive to the palace of the king; seek out the Duc de la Fère and give it in his hands. No other, my son—to the duc alone. I, myself, will see the cardinal without delay. Go now, and if yonder *gendarme* stops you, show him the packet which you bear; he will doubtless let you pass. Hasten, Philippe; we yet may be in time! Hasten! Hasten!"

Philippe departed hurriedly; Sébastian stood for a moment looking after him, then fell on his knees and clasped his crucifix in prayer. A deep-toned bell tolled solemnly; a file of priests, with downcast eyes and bended heads, passed slowly along the portico and disappeared through the door of The House of Peace. Abbé Sébas-

tian rose from his knees and crossed to the garden gate; he lingered till the bell had ceased to toll, then stretched out his arms toward a darkened cell and murmured, in quavering tenderness:

"Claudien . . . my son . . . my son!"

CHAPTER XX

A PRIEST walked slowly across the garden, trailing behind him a wooden rake, and began to smooth the gravel paths. He moved with a listless step and drooping shoulders, his figure gaunt and awkward beneath his flapping gown; and his cheeks had a muddy tinge which seemed reflected in the whites of his sad, protruding eyes. Poor Lucien—an humble toiler, meek and joyless—whose liver doled a life-long penance for uncommitted sins.

Brother Henri came out upon the gallery and leaned across its rail. Henri was of a widely different type from Lucien, sleek and plump, with restless ferret eyes, forever on the watch for earthly happenings, and fingers which seemed to itch eternally to break the seals of metaphoric bundles with unknown contents.

"Philippe! . . . Philippe!" he called. "Ho, Lucien! Hast thou seen Philippe?"

Lucien paused in his work upon the path,

looked upward, and placed his hand behind his ear:

"*Hein?*"

"Hast thou seen Philippe?" asked Henri, in a louder tone.

"Yes, certainly," said Lucien briefly, and, as though the matter were entirely closed, went on with his sober raking.

Henri laughed, and descending the stair, came forward and touched the raker's arm.

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"*Philippe!*" bawled Henri in the other's ear. "I want Philippe! Where is he?"

"I know not."

"Lucien, you drive one mad. Where *was* he?"

"Running."

Again the plump priest laughed, stopped suddenly, and bethought him that the mystery anent Philippe was still unsolved.

"U-u-m! You say you saw him running, Lucien? Er—how?"

"As though the fiend was after him," said Lucien gravely. "I saw him from a corner of

the garden whisk through the gate and rush furiously away, his vestment fluttering upon the wind."

"Then the fiend caught him not," the fat one grinned.

"Methinks Philippe outfooted him," the lean one answered, with a bilious smile, "for his pace was lightning like."

"And Father Sébastian?" Henri asked.

"Gone also—with greater dignity and less of haste—but gone."

Henri whistled softly, and bit his thumb in earnest meditation.

"Now, what on earth," he muttered, "could take them off so strangely and with such precipitance?" He looked up slyly. "Eh, Lucien?"

Lucien leaned upon his implement and answered solemnly:

"Brother, . . . I rake the garden paths, and trouble not my spirit with mundane matters . . . other than those which appertain to rakes."

A knock was heard at the garden gate, but Henri paid no heed.

"Lucien," he said, "you are indeed a stoic—

marvellous! And yet," he added, with a meditative sigh, "and yet I wonder much what caused Philippe to whisk so suddenly away. Would he had paused to tell us." Another knock resounded on the gate. "Secretiveness, my Lucien, is an evil habit; it narrows the mind, creates a selfish soul, and slams the door of information in the face of progress. Now had Philippe but stopped a single instant to tell——"

But here Henri was rudely interrupted in his speculations by a louder and more impatient knocking, and Lucien once more leaned upon his rake and ventured on a sapient observation:

"Methinks, Henri, your boundless curiosity would lead you to ascertain who stands outside the gate."

"True, O stoic—true," the other grinned, as he crossed the garden. "My mind was occupied with that sly Philippe and his surreptitious whisking. . . . God save us, what a fox!"

The gate was opened, and Le Corbeau, watching from behind her latticed screen, saw the black-robed Jesuit enter, and at his heels two solemn-faced attending priests. The Jesuit

leaned upon his staff and walked with a twisting limp; beneath his brow two cold grey eyes looked out forbiddingly, and the corners of his mouth curved downward to a thin, protruding chin. Henri bowed low before him as he raised his hand in silent salutation and halted in the path.

"My son," he said, with an acid smile, "your entrance gate is in need of a nimbler foot than yours . . . or mine," and he thrust a padded sandal into view. "Go say to your abbé that Castine is come at the order of the cardinal."

"Your pardon, holy father," Henri stammered, "but I—er—but Father Sébastian has gone—er—a short time since."

"Whither?"

"Alas! I know not. He left no word, and went in haste. But I pray you, father, rest beneath the shade, for, doubtless, his absence will be brief."

"My son, I thank you; so be it," said Castine, and crossed to a seat at the abbé's writing table, his two attendants likewise seeking shelter from the sun.

Henri bore a cup of water to the guest.

When the Jesuit had drunk he handed back the empty vessel, and wiped his thin blue lips with a claw-like hand. There was something in the motion of that hand, a something swift and sure, that sent a chill to Le Corbeau's heart and set her shivering behind her screen.

A priest appeared on the gallery, shaded his eyes, and looked along the road toward the south, then turned and called:

"The troopers! They have come!"

On the instant Henri caught the fire of fear and cried excitedly:

"Quick, Lucien! Ring the cloister bell! Summon the brothers! Haste you! They shall not take him!"

"What's this? What's this?" said Castine, tartly. "Cease! Cease your clamour, man!"

But Henri only wrung his hands and cried out more loudly: "The soldiers of the king! They will take him—Claudien! Quick! Hide him in the cellar! Will *no* one help him?"

"Pish!" the Jesuit sneered, and turned to the priest on the gallery; "what means the madman?"

"'Tis true," the priest called back. "The sol-

diers of the king are on the road, and I fear they seek for Claudien."

A deafening hubbub rose; the priests poured out upon the gallery with excited cries and gestures; the clean, harsh blare of a trumpet's note rang echoing along the gray stone parapets, and died in the pounding rush of horses' hoofs; a jingling clatter of dismounting men—and an officer struck the gate with the hilt of his naked sword.

"In the king's name . . . open!"

Le Corbeau crouched behind the lattice and pressed a white, affrighted face against its bars, while Henri rushed about in distracted circles, till the Jesuit caught his arm and commanded angrily, as he pushed him forward:

"The gate, dolt! The gate!"

Henri advanced, but at a louder knock sprang back in terror. Lucien flung down his rake, and whispered as he passed his quaking friend:

"I fear, Henri, that your curiosity is on the wane."

The gate was opened, and an officer stepped in, followed by a double score of men-at-arms;

he spoke an order sharply, and they formed a line along the path, while two remained behind and barred the gate with their sabres crossed. Castine stepped forward and spoke with dignity:

"May I ask, monsieur, the cause of this strange infraction of our rules?"

The officer raised a hand to his round steel cap. "Your pardon, holy father, I but obey the order of the king."

"And your order?" asked the Jesuit.

"Is positive and explicit. To take into custody one Léon la Valière, a priest of The House of Peace."

A murmur ran along the gallery and sank into a breathless hush.

"And on what charge," the Jesuit questioned, "do you seek our brother?"

"My instructions demand that I hail the prisoner before the king, and there instructions end."

Castine pursed his lips. "The procedure is most unusual. If I refuse?"

The officer replied in all due reverence: "I would spare you, father, the indignity of

force, and trust, in turn, you will respect my orders."

He drew from his belt a paper, which he placed in Castine's hand. The churchman read it carefully twice through, folded, and gave it back from whence it came.

"Far be it from me," he said, with a wave of his flowing sleeve, "to offer discourtesy to the mandates of the king; but the abbé here in charge is absent, and without his sanction I cannot assent to the seizure of a member of his household."

A hum of approval echoed along the gallery; Castine looked up, and the murmur ceased. The officer toyed with the handle of his sword, and after a moment's thought, said firmly:

"The matter is imperative. . . . It may not wait!"

"It must!" And Castine's lean jaws closed with an angry snap.

The trooper bowed. "I should much regret," he offered, with grave respect, "to resort to measures stronger than persuasion, but as you will——"

He shrugged his shoulders, turned to his

men-at-arms, and raised his sword. Le Corbeau would have lifted her frightened voice in protest, but the Jesuit forestalled her.

"Stop!" he commanded sternly. "I, too, am vested with authority . . . and will be obeyed!" He caught the shrinking Henri by the arm. "Go seek Sébastian and ask his immediate return."

"But, father," Henri whined, "I know not where he is."

"Then search until you find him," came the harsh reply. "Go!"

Henri ran forward, but recoiled in fear, as the two crossed sabres barred his exit from the gate, while the trooper also laid his sword on the gleaming barrier, and cried:

"In the name of the King of France!"

The Jesuit bent his head as the eagle stoops, and his keen grey eye burned wrathfully; he limped down that line of steel and struck the sabres sharply with his oaken staff.

"In the name of his Eminence . . . the Cardinal!"

The sword-points fell, and Henri sped down the dusty road like a hunted hare.

The trooper touched his helm. "Your pardon, monseigneur; I feared for the moment that yours was an artifice to aid my prisoner's escape." He bowed and humbly bent his knee. "Your pardon."

Castine received the officer's apology with a glance of cool contempt, turned on his heel, and addressed a priest who was standing near at hand:

"Go bid your former brother, Léon la Valière, attend me here without delay." To the officer he said, with curt but easy dignity: "You will see, monsieur, that the servants of God deal not in trickeries. I, Castine, am deputed by the cardinal to question this brother whom you seek concerning certain matters which have come to pass. I beg you, therefore, to retire; the prisoner shall remain within your sight throughout."

Once more the trooper bowed respectfully, turned, and gave a low-voiced order to his followers, who wheeled, retreated, and formed a line along the garden wall. The Jesuit leaned upon his staff and limped across to the table beneath the shade, and for five long, aching minutes no sound was heard save the stamping of

restless steeds outside and the rattle of their bridle reins.

And while a woman watched, her heart churned hotly in her breast, and her spinning thought wove backward to the shop of Madame Denise and the evil thing that crouched beside a dingy window—waiting—waiting—for the coming of a priest.

CHAPTER XXI

Le Corbeau saw a line of priests file silently out upon the gallery, descend the stair, and pass with solemn pace along the portico; it moved down the gravel path, spread out in a close-linked ring, and Claudien stood before the Jesuit. His head was held erect; his sad grey eyes looked calmly upon his judge, but his face was white—white as the spotless robe which loosely hung from his straight, square shoulders. His mantle had been laid aside, and he seemed among his sombre-robed inquisitors like a pallid rift in the core of a frowning cloud.

Castine raised his hand and surveyed the waiting circle long and earnestly.

"Peace be with you."

The brothers bowed their heads; the Jesuit turned to Claudien, and his words were slow, dispassionate, and calm:

"Léon la Valière, once a brother in The House of Peace, I speak in the name of the Holy Church of Rome. . . . We meet in sor-

row—sorrow for the cause of meeting, and for the servant who has fallen in disgrace. Around you are the brothers of your Order bowed in grief—for you whom once they loved—for the sacred vow which your sin dishonours." He waved his hand and pointed to the grim-faced men-at-arms. "There stand the soldiers of the King of France, clothed with authority to seize your person on a grievous charge. The nature of this charge is known . . . to you . . . and to us; we spare you its recital. And now, if there be aught which you may say in palliation of your sin, I conjure you, in the name of the Holy Church, to speak." Castine waited, but no answer came. "Speak . . . ere the book be closed!"

The white priest bowed his head and answered calmly:

"I have sinned."

"Who or what is the cause of your transgression? . . . Speak!"

Claudien pressed his hands together and slowly raised his eyes.

"Father . . . I entreat you—question me no further. . . . I can say no more."

Castine's mouth grew hard. "The question is one which neither you nor I may shirk. I ask . . . and must receive response. My son, we wait."

"I cannot answer."

"Refusal aids you nothing. I come at the instance of the cardinal, whose will must be obeyed. Speak!"

Again came silence, longer and more intense, while Castine scowled and bit his nether lip. He leaned across the table, waiting, then raised and shook his hand:

"So be it. Then since you will not name the reason of your fall, I name it in your stead. . . . A *woman!*" A murmur broke from the ring of listeners. "Speak! Is this not true?"

"Once more, holy father," came the low response, "I cannot answer."

The murmuring increased. Upon the Jesuit's pale, lank cheek a crimson spot appeared; he bent his head and thrust out his dogged chin, deep-lined with the crease of his curving lips.

"What need," he harshly cried, "to hide the truth beneath a veil of sullen silence? What need . . . when your name is bandied from lip

to lip—a subject for idle jest and ridicule? What need . . . when even the rabble in the streets of Paris now know the shameful story of the Good Samaritan and Le Corbeau—his paramour!"

"Stop! *It is false!*"

Claudien's voice rose clear and resonant, and even the Jesuit made no move to break the hush which followed. A moment passed, and the white priest spoke again, but in the measured tones of fearless truth:

"That I loved this woman it is true. . . . That for her I broke my vows and sacred promises is true. . . . That for her I would have deserted Church and brotherhood is also true. . . . The rest—before just Heaven—is a lie!"

A louder murmur rose, and the priests moved restlessly; one brother stepped from the watching group and stood apart, while a listening woman panted in imprisonment, and thrilled with a nameless joy. Castine raised his hand, and the murmuring ceased.

"You love this woman still?" Claudien bowed his head. "Knowing what she is?"

The answer came in the same unruffled tone:

"What she has been . . . crushes me. What she is . . . I know not, . . . but I love her still."

Another brother left the group, looking askance at him whose lips profaned his cloth, while his fellow-priests, as though by mute consent, devoutly crossed themselves and edged away. The Jesuit bent his frown on the passive face before him and asked, in rising warmth:

"Do you realize the evil import of your words? You stand confessed of a sinful passion —glorying in your infamy—insulting the very Church of Rome with the shame of your avowal."

"I speak the simple truth . . . without irreverence or a thought to wound."

"Your love for the woman was criminal," Castine accused.

"Of such a sin," the priest replied, "my heart is clean. . . . I gave her my love. . . . I gave her honour and respect."

"Where is your proof of innocence?"

"Where is your proof of guilt?"

"Where?" the Jesuit thundered. "Where? . . . In the body of the murdered man—Jardin!" And he struck the table sharply with

his oaken staff, to still the wild confusion among his listeners, then turned again to Claudien: "You are known to have been alone with her—alone . . . at night—her lover in thought and deed. Your sacred robe concealed the garments of a cavalier; you even wore a sword—*you*—a priest. Jardin is dead. . . . *He* was the woman's lover also—Paris knows it, even as you have known—your rival for the painted courtesan! . . . Speak! . . . Who did the deed?"

Again came lagging silence, through which Le Corbeau heard the pawing steeds and the ceaseless quarrelling of sparrows in the ivy vine.

"Silence is confession of your guilt," said Castine, solemnly, "and denial is your right if innocent."

"Father—I cannot—answer."

The Jesuit controlled himself by force of will alone. Justice he loved, and manhood he admired, but zeal for the Mother Church came first of all.

"And do you fully understand," he asked, "the consequences of your stubbornness?" He pointed to the troopers lined against the wall.

"Your seizure by the law? To be led through the public streets—a common criminal? The prison and the block?"

Claudien looked him in the eye and bowed his head in answer—an answer which would be the same when the headsman raised his axe.

"Léon la Valière," said Castine sternly, "the Church has sought to shield your body and your name, but your silence ties the hand that would stay the executioner. The soldiers wait. . . . Give me your oath of innocence—a single word—and I bid them to be gone. . . . Refuse . . . and the path you choose is yours to walk alone."

Claudien raised his chin, like a warrior hopeless, but unafraid:

"Father, . . . I have chosen, . . . and I walk . . . alone."

There were many there who loved him still, even though his hands were stained with blood, and some among them fell upon their knees, while one sobbed out aloud, turned, and fled to the darkness of his cell. And even Castine's chastened spirit stirred, for he knew that before him stood *a man*.

"My son," he said, in a softened tone, "I make one last appeal. . . . If you are innocent, and in your silence seek to shield a woman's sin, I tell you your folly is greater than your fault. As the justice of man will fall on you, so will the justice of God be meted out to her. . . . Your cloth demands the truth. Answer!"

Claudien sadly shook his head; the Jesuit's nostrils whitened, and his jaw grew set and hard.

"Then go!" he cried. "And may Heaven judge you as your sin deserves." He lifted his hand and addressed the sorrowing priests: "Brothers, . . . you have heard. His path is chosen, and it parts from yours. When this dark day is done, I charge you to forget—even as *he* shall be forgotten, . . . dishonoured in life . . . dishonoured in death, . . . his name henceforth unspoken in your brotherhood."

The priests were weeping silently, and Le Corbeau's tears were dropped with theirs, a priceless offering on an altar of human love.

Again the Jesuit spoke: "And you who have loved him—lest you cry my judgment harsh—I plead your aid in his condemnation. If there be one among you can speak in the cause of

him who stands before us, let not your tongue be silent." Alas! no answer came. "If there be one who can look into his heart and say . . . he is innocent of crime, . . . in the name of the Holy Church—speak now!"

Once more that crawling pause. Castine bent his eagle neck and waited.

"Answer!"

But only the sparrows twittered, and a brother sobbed in pity for his friend. The Jesuit made a sign to the watchful officer, who gave a low command; two troopers stepped from the rigid line and placed their hands on the shoulders of the unresisting priest, when a voice rang out, shrill, vibrant with distress:

"Stop! He is stainless . . . before God and man!"

Claudien started at the sound, and turned in wonder.

"Who speaks?" the Jesuit cried. "Stand forth!"

No answer came save a rattling of the latticed door, as Le Corbeau shook it with her bare white hands. Locked! Locked! And Léon stood in the soldiers' grasp! He bore her guilt!

His lips were sealed for her! For her! He would die . . . and speak no word! She beat on the hard, unyielding door, then seized a wooden stool, and struck—struck in the madness of a woman's fear and love. A splintering crash—a fiercer blow—the frail thing tottered on its hinge and fell—and she sprang across the shattered barrier.

"'Tis I—Le Corbeau! . . . The deed is mine! . . . *I* killed him—*I!*"

"Adrienne!" breathed Léon, in a gasping whisper. "Adrienne!"

For ten short, startled breaths soldier and churchman stared in blank astonishment; then rose a tumult among the outraged priests, which Castine vainly sought to quell.

"The woman!" they shrieked. "A woman in the cloister! The murderess! The courtesan! Le Corbeau! Le Corbeau, the wanton!" And they surged about her with threatening hands and angry execrations.

"Peace! Peace!" cried Castine, stretching out his staff; and when the uproar lulled, he turned to the officer and demanded sharply:

"Seize that woman!"

The soldiers and priests advanced. Léon took one forward step to interpose, but the troopers hung upon his arms. He shook them off as a stag might toss a hound, and stood at Le Corbeau's side, then turned and stretched out his long, lean arm.

"Not as a priest, but as a son of France I warn you, . . . touch her not!"

The priests fell back; the officer looked—and smiled—and gave no order to his men. Castine pushed forward through the press, and confronted Léon angrily.

"Stand aside!"

"No!"

"I command you!"

"I will not obey."

"The creature is a murderess!"

"I care not!"

"A harlot!"

"She is a woman. . . . Listen, father, . . . and *you*, brothers of The House of Peace. . . . You condemn her, knowing not her crime, its nature, or its cause. A woman, defenceless and alone. . . . Let her go in peace, and on *me* may your judgment fall."

Again a murmur rose from priests and men-at-arms; from the priests low, muttering, and long; but the troopers straightened their harnessed backs and raised their sabre hilts in brotherly salute.

"Hold!" cried Castine fiercely. "We have suffered you to speak in defiance of Church and king. We have borne your insolence—your sullen disobedience. We will suffer it no longer. The woman you shield is a murderess by her own confession. She has crept like a thief into our sanctuary—her very presence a defilement and a curse!"

Le Corbeau crouched at Léon's side, her face half buried in his flowing robe. At Castine's words she turned to him in trembling appeal.

"Father, I came for him—for Léon—in tears and repentance for the wrong I did him."

The muttering priests drew nearer, inch by inch, with snarling menace and eager hands, but Léon swept their circle with his arm.

"Stand back!"

"Fool!" the Jesuit stormed. "Fool, are you mad? Are you blind to her wickedness and shameless vice? She—the wretch—the outcast!

Look! Look upon her . . . in all her loathsome degradation — she — the foul thing that cowers at your feet! And you defend her? Heaven help you! What can you say in her defence?"

The tall Samaritan once more stretched his arm, and the roll of his deep voice drowned his brothers' murmuring:

"What saith your Master, which is God in Heaven? . . . '*With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.*'"

The priests shrank back in awe, the Jesuit found no word to answer, and the troopers bit their lips in silence, cursed their rigid discipline, and longed to cheer.

CHAPTER XXII

THERE were sudden sounds of commotion at the garden gate; Sébastian entered hurriedly, and close upon his heels came the lean Philippe, still panting from his run. The abbé raised his hand:

"His Eminence, the Cardinal!"

From his carriage stepped that calm old minister, and priests and troopers bent their knees as the crimson cassock passed. Beneath a red calotte gleamed his silvered hair, which framed a face thin, placid, seamed with lines of earthly care and kindliness. He leaned on a proffered arm, approached the Jesuit, and spoke:

"Castine, . . . your inquiry may cease. Our son is guiltless of the charge preferred."

The Jesuit frowned, and pointed a slim, accusing finger at the woman who crouched at Léon's feet. "We have heard it from the wanton's lips, not his; the wanton whom he shielded and still shields."

Abbé Sébastian looked down reproachfully, looked from the tear-stained face to the shattered door, and understood.

"Father," she cried, "I beg forgiveness for my broken pledge, but I only sought to save him—to save Léon, father—whom you love. The soldiers would have taken him away. He would bear my guilt, and there were none to save him!" She crept toward the abbé and knelt to him. "Father—you will forgive——"

"No!" the Jesuit cried, and turned to the cardinal in a burst of religious zeal. "'Tis not enough that she should strip the mantle from a mindless priest, exposing him to shame and ridicule, but now she pollutes our robes of purity with the vileness of her tainted touch! A harlot in a cloister! A mockery! A curse!"

His fierceness fired the rage of the restless priests, and again a vengeful storm of malediction poured upon the outcast's head.

Le Corbeau shrank in terror beneath the harsh, unpitying castigation of their murmuring tongues, but the cardinal took her hand and raised her gently.

"Peace, Castine!" he said, in calm reproof.

"The sinner has repented. As Léon shielded, so will I also shield. Peace!"

He turned to the angry priests, whose voices died away at the sound of his gentle speech.

"My children, I have heard the story of your brother's sin, and my heart is sorely grieved; but you who weep with me because of him, must strive to remember that a priest of God is one of God's humanity. Were he tempted not, where then would be his triumph over evil—the glory of his life of purity? What preach ye to the world? Mercy and forgiveness. Turn not, then, from him whose feet have wandered where yours, in mortal weakness, may also tread."

The brothers bowed their heads to the just rebuke, and the cardinal released Le Corbeau's hand and turned to Léon.

"My son, if you would once more enter The House of Peace, and can kneel in penitence before its altar, I pledge myself to intercede for the absolution of your sin."

The Samaritan inclined his head, but made no answer, and the aged minister spoke on, in mellow, even tones:

"Your sphere of usefulness amongst us . . .

you have forfeited; and henceforth your field of labor lies across the sea in a new land, where your harvest may be gathered and given up to God. Turn then from her who has led your heart astray—turn, my son, forever . . . and forget."

Léon's gaze passed slowly from the speaker's face, rested on a woman's streaming eyes, and lingered tenderly.

"If this you may not do," said the cardinal, in a sterner tone, "then go you forth into the world with her whose love you buy with the coin of folly. Go forth without our blessing—without the sanction of Holy Church—and answer to your heavenly Father for the trust your soul forsakes. Tempted, you fell. Forgiven, I offer you return into your brotherhood."

Léon faced the cardinal: "And she——"

"Must fight her battle as you fight yours, . . . apart from you forever."

Le Corbeau clutched Sébastian's arm, and a stifled sob escaped her lips.

"Forever? Alone——"

The Samaritan raised his head. "Your Eminence——"

The cardinal interrupted with a swift, imperious gesture. "Her hands are stained with a fellow-creature's blood; for this she must answer to the king, and sue for pardon."

"Pardon!" Le Corbeau cried, as the woman in her blood burst forth in fierce rebellion. "Pardon! And what then? . . . To be cast on the world and look for mercy there!" She laughed hysterically. "Mercy for the woman who has fallen! Mercy . . . in the human wolves that snarl and tear her flesh! Mercy . . . when you crush her heart on earth and shut her soul from heaven! What hope of pardon? What hope?"

The cardinal raised his hand, and once more hushed the murmuring of the priests.

"My child," he said, "your sins are deep, but the Father is merciful and just. Knock, . . . and the gate will be opened."

"Aye, knock!" she flung back bitterly. "Knock till my hands shall bleed—and call in vain! Your heaven is deaf—its door is barred, . . . and the outcast's cry is drowned in the prayers of those who pity not. Ask pity—pardon, if you will—and wait for pardon, . . . wait!

There is pardon for the man—pardon—always pardon! For woman . . . none!" She wheeled upon the priests, in a storm which rent her with its passionate despair. "The woman is a serpent! Crush her with your heel, . . . and cry to God the glory of your deed!"

The storm was passed; she sank at Sébastian's feet, and sobbed, in broken-hearted misery:

"Father—help me—help me! Where can I turn? What hand to save me now?"

"MINE!"

Léon strode to the stricken woman's side, and would have lifted her, but the cardinal interposed.

"Heed ere you choose," he warned. "Your step, once taken, is immutable. For you there is no return."

"I ask for none," the priest replied, and a flush swept over his pallid cheek. "Withdraw your pardon—send me forth unblessed—stripped of my robe—your curse upon my name——"

"No, Léon—not for me!" Le Corbeau cried. "Not—not for me!"

But Léon paid no heed; he faced his judge, in courage born of justice and of love.

"Shall I go free," he asked, "my path made smooth, while hers is choked with thorns? To shirk the lash which falls on her alone? To bury my dishonour in an unknown land, and pray for hope where manhood's spirit failed? To stain your altar with a coward's lie? No, Monseigneur! And no, again! You offer me the bread of your forgiveness, . . . but I may not eat!"

Once more he would have raised the weeping woman from the earth, but again the cardinal interposed and spoke in unruffled calm:

"Think—think, my son, of the life you offer her. To go forth hand in hand—a beggar and a criminal—to battle with the world. Live . . . when the memory of the past shall dog your every step—your hidden sin a pillow for your sleep. Live . . . till the passion of your selfish love burns low and dies. Live without hope—without the God your stubborn heart forsakes. *This* you offer her. What more?"

"An arm to shield her helplessness . . . while life shall last."

"And then?"

The cardinal's tone was coldly calm, but behind it lay the power and wisdom of unfaltering faith. Before him stood a man whose honour he could trust; a man who would give his name—his blood—for a woman marked with the brand of Cain. But the Church asked more. What profited the torture of the cross if naught was gained thereby save suffering? The priest might give a few short years of love and tenderness—and then—what then?

Léon raised his head to speak, but his tongue was mute, for the gulf beyond grew dark with shadows, and he shivered at the plunge. The cardinal laid his hand on the shoulder of the Good Samaritan, and spoke as a father speaks, in duty and in love:

"Think you my sixty years are filled with unwisdom and unkindliness — that my heart is warped and pitiless to human grief? Ah, no, my son; I've walked on trouble's road . . . and know. Go seek God's mercy in your field of toil. Subdue your passion. Trample on its fires. Forget the woman. Shut her from your heart. Go! Leave her fate to me!"

Léon took a backward step, and stared, in reeling unbelief, fearing, wondering.

"You—you—" he gasped. "And what can *you* offer her?"

"A shield your feeble arm can never give"—the cardinal stepped to Le Corbeau's side and flung his mantle across her shrinking form—"the purple of the Church. You seek to shield her body. . . . I, her soul!"

Still Léon stared—stared stupidly; his brain was stunned, and his heart pumped vainly to supply its need. He raised his head to speak, and slowly it drooped again upon his breast. Le Corbeau rose to go to him, but the cardinal restrained her with a warning hand. Philippe stepped forward, in tender sympathy, but his way was barred by the Jesuit's oaken staff.

A painful stillness fell, and even the sparrows' twittering was hushed in the ivy vine. Once more the priest stood silently, while battle raged between his soul and heart. He saw her crouched and trembling beside the grey old man who had been a father and a friend through years of grief and toil, and his very blood cried out in pity of the pain his choice must bring.

He saw the cloister with its rows of gloomy cells and the breeze-swept garden drowsing in the sun. He heard a droning, whispered song that dinned forever in his ears: "Will you always live so, Léon—lonely and sad at heart, . . . with none to love you with a great and lasting love? . . . Will you pass the cup untasted, then; the cup that brims with the bubbling joy of love?" His head was spinning, and the world swam madly round and laughed and laughed. He dimly saw his brother priests, with faces set and drawn, waiting, waiting for his heart to die, . . . while the silence piled upon him till his breath grew hot and panting as it came. He faltered, and turned at last to the abbé in mute appeal.

Sébastian spread his weak old arms, and called from the depths of a father's yearning heart:

"My son, my son, come back to the arms I hold to you . . . and a love which is yours forever. Claudien, . . . come home, . . . come home!"

The priests and soldiers bowed their heads.

"Léon, . . . my Léon!" Le Corbeau sobbed, and sank upon her knees.

"Go forth with her," the Jesuit cried, "or return once more into The House of Peace." He pointed his claw-like finger at the Poppy Flower, as Sébastian lifted a crucifix. "There kneels the world. . . . Above you bends the cross of God!"

"*Choose!*"

The ivory image seemed to stoop and stretch its nail-pierced hands, and the kneeling woman raised her rounded arms.

"My love, . . . my love," she moaned, and the rest was told in her haunting eyes.

For a moment longer Léon stood, white, silent, irresolute. He looked on Adrienne—she who had once besought him to save her soul. How could he save it now, and spare her the pang of parting? Did he not love her still . . . with a wondrous, lasting love, far deeper than his human selfishness? A love which must buy her soul's salvation, even if his heart were crucified. Only in parting could such a price be paid. He stepped toward the goal of his earthly hope, and laid his hand in tenderness on the woman's head.

"God . . . keep you, . . . Adrienne!" he

murmured brokenly—turned—sank down at Sébastian's feet, and pressed his lips to the ivory crucifix which shook in the abbé's hands.

Around him his brothers knelt in a wordless prayer. Le Corbeau staggered to her feet, but was caught on the cardinal's supporting arm.

"Father," she moaned, "I have tried so hard—and I loved him—loved him——"

"Be brave, my child," the cardinal comforted. "Léon is suffering for your sake. Be brave for his."

Castine stepped to the waiting officer. "Go," he said; "the cardinal and she will follow."

The lieutenant raised his hand; his men-at-arms, with a lingering glance at the robe which hid a soldier in the priest, turned and filed, with a soundless tread, through the cloister's open gate. The Jesuit made a sign, and the priests rose silently and followed him. The line of sombre cassocks passed slowly along the portico, mounted the stairs to the gallery above, and crawled into the cloister's shadowy hold.



"Choose!"

Slowly, slowly that still procession moved, and Léon and his abbé followed.

"Father," Le Corbeau cried, as she watched one priest alone, "father, he goes without a word of love—without a look. He gives me his hard, cold blessing . . . and forgets!"

"No, no, my child," said the cardinal tenderly; "Léon will not forget."

"But I love him, father—love him—" And she would have run to him, but the cardinal restrained her by gentle touch and word.

"His sacrifice is made for you alone, and is greater than your love can understand."

"He loves his cross—not me," she answered bitterly. "His God who is stern and merciless to woman's sin. His God who thrusts me back—his—*his*—not mine!"

The cardinal took her hand and held it in both his own.

"Repentance," he said, "brings its fruit to ripen in the sunshine of our own good works. Heaven bends in pity to its children . . . and will heed. Be brave, my child; this grief of yours will also pass away."

A trumpet called faintly beyond the garden wall.

"Come," said the cardinal, and sought to lead her toward the gate, "come, we will seek the king."

But she held back pleadingly, and sobbed: "A moment, father—only a moment more—till he passes from me . . . and is gone. . . . I will try then, father, to love your God; . . . but it's hard . . . when my heart is dying, . . . when he turns without a look. . . . See! . . . he forgets—forgets——"

The last of the silent line had disappeared, and Léon and his abbé stood upon the gallery, alone. Le Corbeau slipped upon her knees and stretched out her hungering arms:

"Léon—my love—forgive!"

The white-haired cardinal turned his back, and the breast beneath the crimson vestment rose and fell to a quickened pulse, for he, too, was but a man.

Léon turned at the sound of her sobbing call, leaned low across the railing, and waved his hand in silent pledge of a memory that should not die. He had given all—all but a memory—and this his heart would keep.

The abbé placed an encircling arm about the

shoulder of his son, and together the two were lost in the cloister's gloom.

The woman rose and sought the cardinal's waiting hand, and passed, with a drooping head, from the garden of The House of Peace.

CHAPTER XXIII

In the convent's chapel, as the voices of the nuns arose in a sad, sweet chant, low, colorless, and pure, a tearful woman knelt apart. A sunbeam, filtering through a crimson pane, stole down to her trembling veil, and played like a blood-red tongue of flame on her heaving, white-clad breast.

She lifted her haunting eyes to the Mother and the Child, while her fingers clung in jealous tenderness to the rosary she loved. . . . That rosary whose string her fierce, exultant hands had snapped—whose beads were scattered, . . . but were found again.

Who, who shall judge if it only told, as yet, two human prayers: "Would the Holy Mother listen and forgive? . . . Would Léon's heart forget?"

A ship, far out at sea, heeled gently to the breathing of a lazy wind, and a tall priest stood

on her after-deck and watched the receding shore—that dim, blue line that sank and sank, and was lost in a mist of tears.

And still he stood till the lingering day was old, and the sun, like a lonely, watch-worn monk, crept down to his cell and slept.

In the murmur of lapping waves the priest could hear a crooning, whispered song, and a woman's sob in the note of a ghostly gull poised, screaming, above the mast.

And still he watched. The stars came out—a million candles squandered in the ritual of night—and the moon mist lay, like a cassock's fold, on the breast of the slumbering sea.

He watched, and silence fell—unbroken—awesome—deep. The toiling vessel rose and sank to the swoop of an oily swell, and the phantom of the Poppy Flower swam on in its bubbly wake.

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